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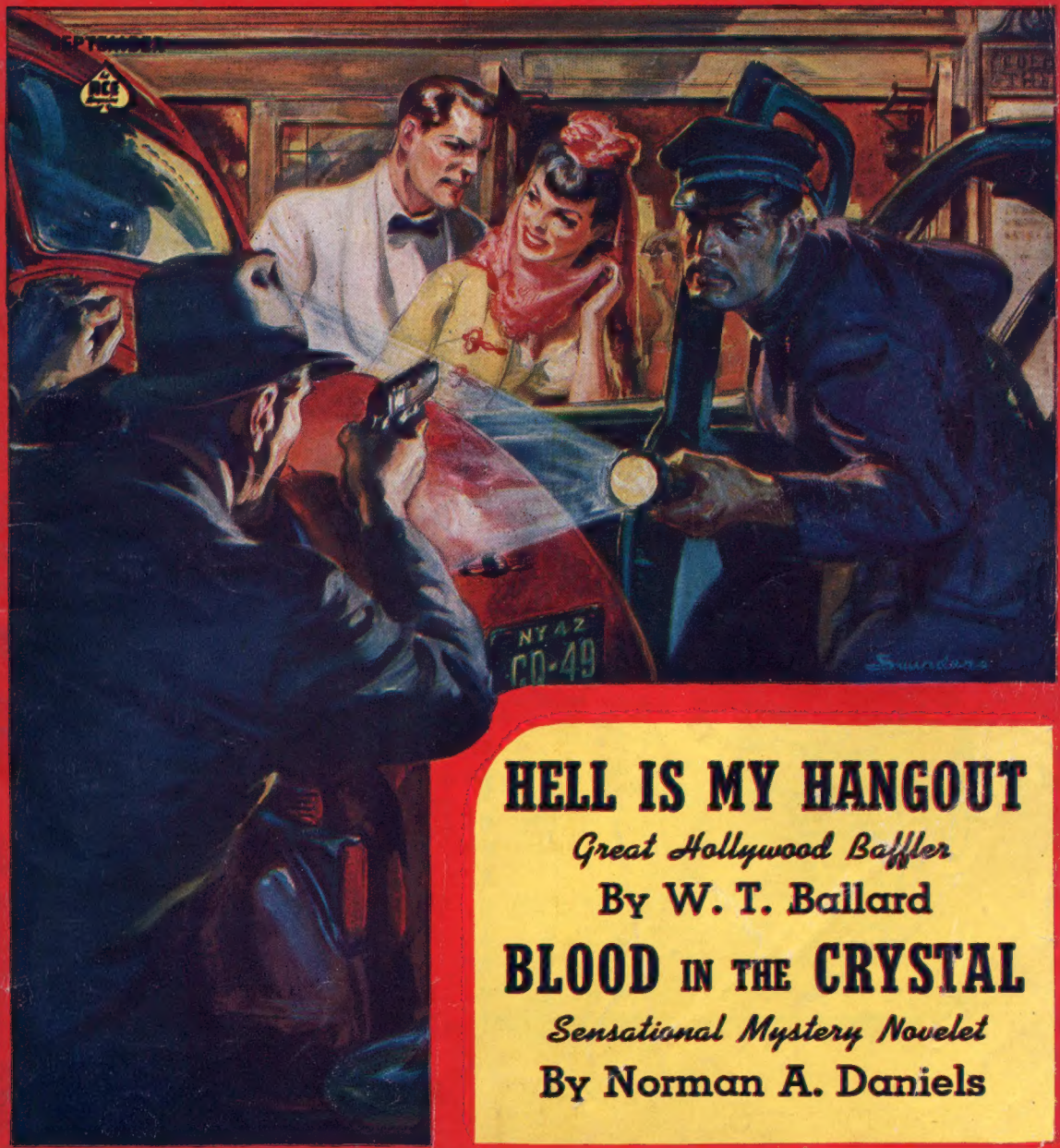


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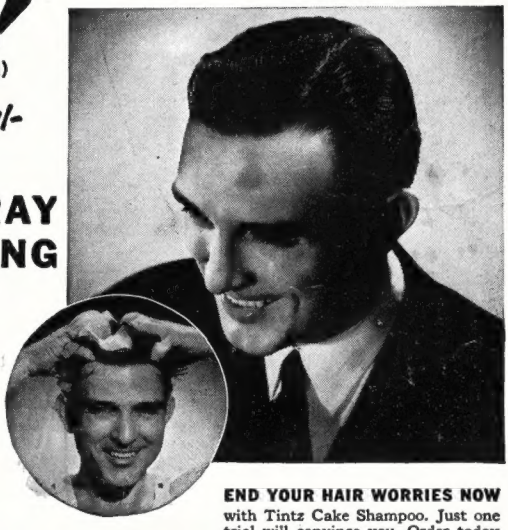

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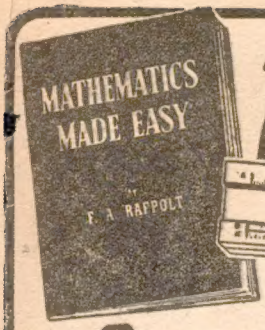


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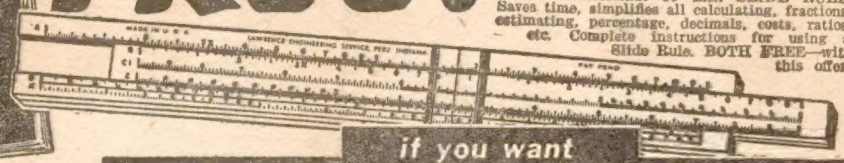

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A. A. WYN
Editor

An ACE Magazine

MAURICE J. PHILLIPS
Managing Editor

September, 1942 Vol. XLV, No. 3

## ★ 10 New, Different Stories—No Serials ★

1. HELL IS MY HANGOUT (Novelet) . . W. T. Ballard 6
*In trying to help a client, mouthpiece Tom Jayne indicts himself as murder's own henchman.*

2. THE DEVIL'S PRESCRIPTION . . . H. Q. Masur 24
*A wily doctor's curative starts a homicide epidemic.*

3. THE CORPSE HAS WINGS . . . . . W. D. Rough 35
*Now you see the body, now you don't.*

4. MURDER BEGINS AT HOME . . . Charles Larson 45
*This host invites the Grim Reaper to help entertain an unwanted guest.*

5. BLOOD IN THE CRYSTAL (Novelet) Norman A. Daniels 48
*Doom's crystal gazer foresees vengeance by remote control.*

6. PARDON MY POISON . . . . . David X. Manners 66
*An expert in lethal brews gets served a hot-seat cocktail.*

7. SECRET AGENT HEX ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) Joe Archibald 70
*Snooty Piper combines G-2 headwork with Commando tactics.*

8. SUICIDE BY REQUEST . . . . . David M. Norman 78
*Instead of playing innocent, Professor King tries to prove himself guilty.*

9. THE MAGIC EYE . . . . . Dale Cochrane 86
*Private Detective Jessup gets all tangled up in a strange manhunt.*

BURY ME ALIVE (Extra Story This Month) Quentin Hall 96
*Two city killers get a lesson in country manners—and rural retribution.*

10. A LITTLE WHITE LYE . . . . . Frederic Brown 100
*In that house of death, another horrible crime performance is scheduled.*

***Cover by Norm Saunders***

Published monthly by Periodical House, Inc.; office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield, Mass. A. A. Wyn, President. Editorial and executive offices, 67 W. 44th St., New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter Nov. 14, 1928, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1942, by Periodical House, Inc. T. M. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, 67 W. 44th St., New York City. Yearly Subscription, $1.00; Single Copies, Ten Cents.

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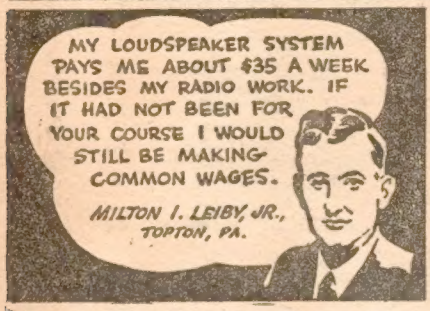
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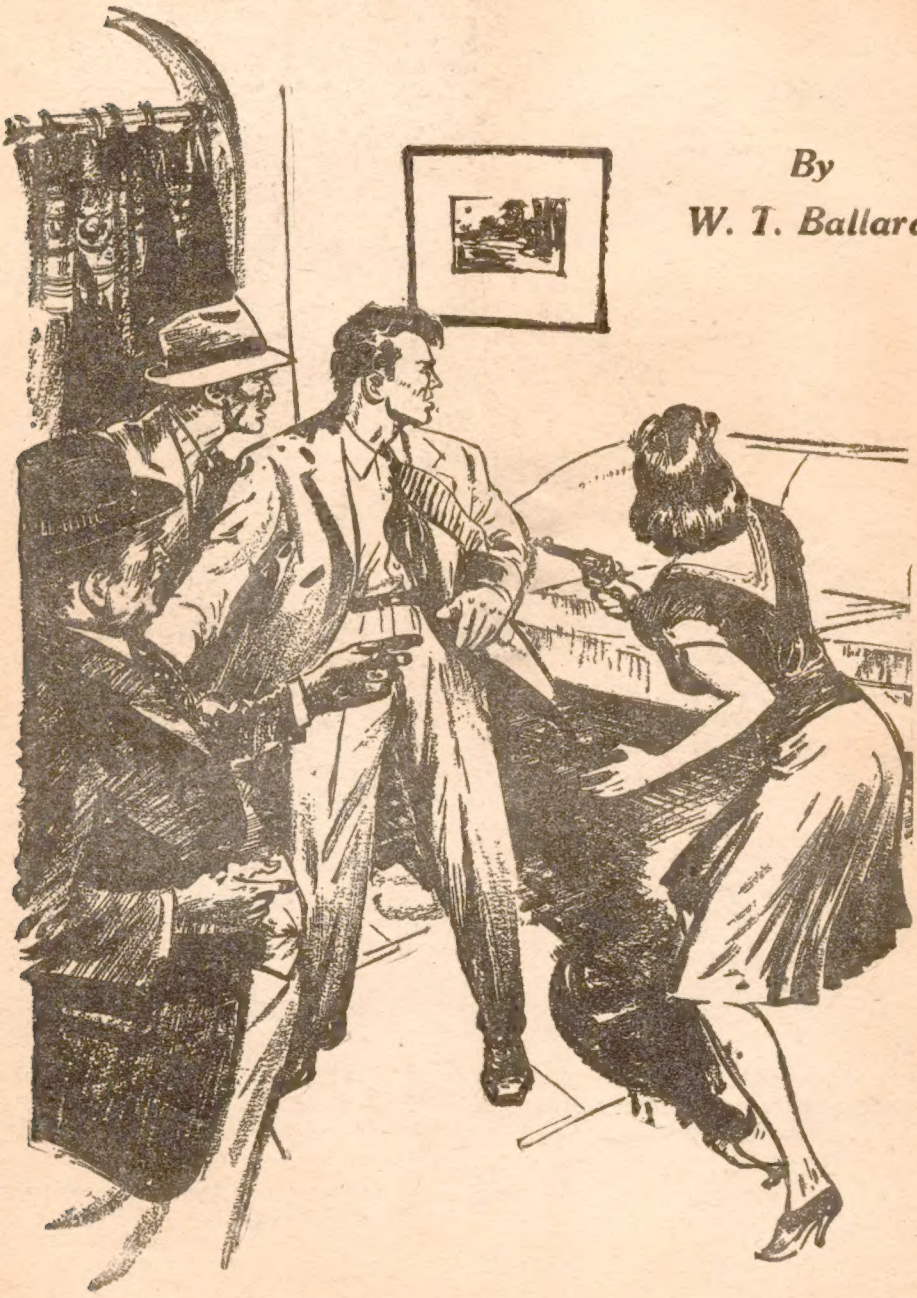
*By*
*W. T. Ballard*



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*Tom Jayne, who did law work for the nether fringe of society, was catapulted suddenly into the vortex of the underworld. For when he tried to free a client from a shakedown setup, he indicted himself as murder's own henchman.*

*The door crashed open and he fired, the gun sounding like thunder in the narrow confines of the room.*

## CHAPTER I

AUSTIN KROUSE didn't want me to marry his daughter. Being honest, I couldn't actually blame him. It would have been bad enough for Mary if I'd followed my original intention and gone into criminal law. But we seldom do what we start out to do in this world. I'd intended to be a great lawyer, swaying juries with my eloquence, rescuing innocent people from the chair. Sure, I'd had fine dreams then, swell dreams . . . a kid, green, fresh from a small town and a small university, ready to set the world on fire.

The trouble was that the world refused to burn, at least for me. I'd hung around cheap restaurants, not because I liked the company but because I liked to eat.

I'd met Manny Forbes in a beanery, and when he found out that I was a lawyer, he'd handed me my first job. I

didn't know who he was then. I found out later that he was a fight manager with a couple of broken-down pugs.

That had been the start. Manny's friends had hired me, then some who weren't his friends, but who figured that Manny was smart. If I was his mouthpiece, I must be good. That's the way it worked out. My business grew, fighters, promoters, managers, touts, jockeys, bookmakers. When you start in the half-world that they call Sporting for lack of a better term, you don't stop easy.

I met some stage people, some picture people. My business grew, my office got bigger. I was supposed to be hot stuff, but in my own eyes I'd become exactly what my clients called me, a mouthpiece.

DON'T get the idea that I wasn't making money. I was. I learned a new life, a new language. I got important. Hollywood headwaiters pointed me out to their guests as if I'd been a movie star. The champ's managers had me fly East to okay a new contract. A leading stable owner, in trouble with the racing commission sent for me and paid ten grand for five hours' work. I was a big shot, important, everything coming my way, and I was only thirty-one.

I met Mary Krouse at a polo match one Sunday. She was just a girl. I didn't even look at her twice. I was used to older women, women with paint on their lips and a thousand dollars on their backs. The chances are that I'd never have looked at her twice, but Pete Cleavenger broke his leg in the second play, and as they carried him off the field, he saw me and asked if I'd drive Mary back to town."

We started talking on the way in. She didn't know who I was, and didn't care. The radio in the car was on. They were playing "When the Blue of the Night . . ." and it brought back a load of memory.

I talked to her about things that I hadn't thought of for years: books, and fishing, and gardens. We went to Chinatown for dinner, then we drove down and parked on the cliffs of Palo Verde. Just a couple of kids, out for an evening. We were engaged when we drove back to town.

Things happen sometimes. I didn't let myself stop to think. I knew that I had to have her, that nothing else mattered. I wanted to drive over to Vegas that night and finish the job, but she wouldn't. She said she had to tell her father first.

I laughed. In the circle that I'd been traveling with, you didn't tell your father anything, even if you knew who he was. But it never occurred to me that her dad, or any father, would have objections to my marrying his daughter. It didn't make sense; why, I'd earned almost a hundred grand the year before.

I said as much to Austin Krouse. He was a big man, with iron-grey hair, an important man, important in the real estate market, in the investment business and in the political setup of the state.

A kid-glove politician who sat in conferences behind closed doors. Nothing crude about him. Everything had to be fourteen karat or better before he would touch it with his capable fingers.

"I tell you, Mr. Jayne. I'm frank. I'm sorry that you and Mary ever met each other. From what I've learned, you're smart, and I don't doubt but that you'll make a lot of money. Frankly, I don't like your business, nor your friends, nor your clients."

I said, a little sourly, "Mary isn't tying up with my business nor my friends nor my clients. She's marrying me."

"No," he said. "She isn't."

WE SAT there looking at each other in silence. I've faced a lot of tough babies in my time, but I never saw a pair of harder eyes than the blue-grey pair that he turned on me. This guy, for all his kid-glove reputation, could be tough. I knew it, and I didn't usually make enemies of that

type of man, not if I could help it.

But in this I didn't care. I was like a kid, in love for the first time. I didn't care what he or the world or the devil said. I was going to marry her. I said so. I gave him warning. I said:

"I don't give a damn about you, Krouse. I've met other big shots in my time and whittled them down to my size. I'd as soon start whittling on you right now. I'm going to marry that girl if it's the last thing that I do."

His mouth under the edge of his close-trimmed mustache shut like a steel trap. "It will be," he said in warning, and rose. "Good-by, Tom Jayne. I'm glad that I met you once. I've always wondered about you."

He turned and left me, closing the door of my office after him, and I stared at it, thoughtfully. Always be careful with a quiet man; they're like a quiet snake that gives no warning before it strikes.

I spent the day thinking about him, and I was thinking about him now as I wheeled my big convertible out Wilshire toward Westwood Village. I didn't like the job that I was on, but it was a job that I had to do myself.

A fight promoter had written a girl some letters and now she was selling them back to him. She was a girl I knew, a girl that everyone who read the newspapers knew. Her name was Helent Trent and she was an actress in a small way when she wasn't busy selling letters or doing other things.

I knew she was smart and that I'd have to watch her. I had to keep my mind on what I was doing. I had to stop thinking about Mary and her father for the moment.

I did just that. I put them out of my mind as I turned into the side street and parked before the building where the Trent woman lived. It was an expensive place. The girl did all right by herself. I went in, found that there was no desk clerk and rode the little elevator up to the second floor.

Her apartment was the last one on the left and I was surprised to find that the door was open a couple of inches. I knocked, got no response, knocked again. Then I pushed on the door gently and had a glimpse of the lighted room beyond. No sound reached my ears. There didn't seem to be anyone there.

I took a step forward, calling her name, then a second step. I never took a third because something fell down on the top of my head and I went out like a light. . . .

I DON'T know how long I was out. I had the sensation of having been there a long time. I lay on the rug, the rough nap scratching my cheek, and tried to get enough strength to open my eyes. I must have groaned. I wasn't conscious of groaning, but my ears picked up the sound. I thought at first that it was someone else, and opened my eyes. Then I struggled to my feet and looked around.

After I'd looked, I realized that it must have been me because there wasn't anyone else in the room save Helen Trent and she was dead. Dead people don't groan, at least proper dead people don't, and Helen Trent was dead. She lay there on the floor, only a couple of feet from where I had lain, and someone had shot her twice, right through the chest.

If it could only have been anyone else but Helen Trent. That was what I thought as I stood looking down at her, seeing how very beautiful she was in death, almost as beautiful as she had been in life.

A hundred people knew that my client had been involved with her. A hundred people would suspect why I was here. It did not occur to me at the moment that I might be accused of her death; that realization came later. But I did realize that this would cause an ugly story and that the sooner I got away from that apartment, the better it would be for me.

Still, I had my client's letters to think of. They should be somewhere in the apartment, and I turned toward the small, modernistic desk.

But I did not get there. Someone

was knocking on the closed door. I stopped, turning so that I could see the white panel. My eyes dropped to the brass knob, and I realized with a growing panic that the knob was turning.

I hoped for one desperate instant that the door was locked. That hope was vain. I saw it move, saw it swing slowly inward and heard a voice call:

"Come on, babe, quit stalling. I know you're home."

I couldn't move. I couldn't say anything, and then the door was wide and Olympic Jones walked into the room.

He stopped when he saw me, his small, ferret eyes got smaller as they moved down from my face and he saw HelenTrent, quiet on the green of the carpet. "Well, hell." He stood there, not moving, not saying anything further.

He was a small man, his body twisted so that his right shoulder was a good two inches lower than his left. Hollywood wits claimed that the twist in his spine had been caused by Jones spending too much time on one knee, for Olympic Jones was a dice player.

He was also a gate crasher, and he drew his nickname from having seen the full program of the Olympic games without giving up one cent at the box office.

It was a feat which he bragged about when drunk and sometimes when sober. He was one of the town's standard oddities, and in its own way, Hollywood was proud of him.

Jones recovered before I did and took time to close the door before I said, "What are you doing here?"

He laughed, an odd, chuckling sound that showed no real mirth. "That's a question, palo, a question I might ask you."

I didn't waste time. I knew Jones of old. I took three steps forward, caught the front of his coat and lifted him until his small toes barely touched the floor. There was only one thing in the world that Jones feared. He thought his health was bad. In reality, you couldn't hurt the little devil. He'd been thrown out of so many places that he bounced like a rubber ball.

"Take it easy," he begged. "I'm tender, see? My bones ain't healthy."

"The rest of you won't be healthy either," I warned him, "if you give me any more smart answers. "What are you doing here?"

He licked his lips. "Hey, lay off, will you, Tom. Helen owed me a hundred so I come up to collect. Where's the harm in that?" He was whining now. "It's okey by me if you bumped her, Tom. She needed bumping. That's God's own truth. Anyone in town will say the same. Hey, take it easy."

I pushed him over onto the couch. I didn't want to hurt him but I was sore as hell. Now that Jones had showed up, there was nothing for it but to call the cops. I turned and walked over to the phone and made the call. When I turned around, Jones was watching me with his bright little eyes.

"What goes on?" he demanded. "You let the cops think that you just found the body, but I saw your car parked out in front a good three hours ago."

I started for him, but he bounced off that couch and made the door a dozen steps ahead of me. An instant later he had ripped it open and was gone.

I started to follow, then changed my mind. I knew that I couldn't catch him. Despite his crooked spine he could move faster than I could and I'd look fine, chasing him along the hall. I turned back and took a look in the desk before the cops got there. The letters I was hunting weren't there. It looked as if I had drawn a blank.

## CHAPTER II

THE boys from the homicide squad weren't too tough. After all, I knew every one of them. They'd all had passes to a lot of shows and fights and the passes had come from my office. The murder gun wasn't anywhere in the apartment. My own gun was still

in my shoulder holster, and it hadn't been fired.

After a couple of hours they turned me loose, but I wasn't kidding myself any as I turned my car toward home. There were still a lot of questions to be answered in connection with Helen Trent's death, and most of them would probably be asked of me.

I'd hardly stepped through the apartment door when the phone rang. I answered it, and a woman's voice said, "It's about time you got home, Mister Jayne."

I didn't like the tone of her voice. There was a little mocking note in it as if she were laughing to herself.

"Who is it?"

She said, "Just a pal that's trying to do you a big favor. You'd better come and see me, Tom. You'd better come as soon as you can."

I'd been trying to place the voice. There was something familiar about it, but I knew so many people. "Zella," I said. "Is this Zella Horn?"

She laughed. "It took you a long time to catch on."

"What's the address?" I asked. "Why should I come to see you?"

She gave me the address and I started in surprise. It was the same apartment house in which Helen Trent had lived.

"I see that you recognize the address." Her voice had turned mocking again. "I'm on the first floor, Tom, not the second. One-o-nine, and don't keep me waiting too long."

I didn't keep her waiting. I didn't know what she was up to but I meant to find out. It took me twenty minutes to drive from my place to hers.

The house looked dark and almost deserted. All the cop cars had gone and the lobby was empty when I crossed it. Zella's door was partly open, and when she heard my step she came out into the hall. "You made a quick trip."

I didn't say anything as I followed her into the apartment and watched her close the door. She was a black-haired girl, a little taller than average, with long legs and a slim body. She was a dancer who had served her time in the town's various night spots, not bad, but not good enough for the big league, nor for pictures.

"What's the gag?"

She said, "I just wondered how much it would be worth to you for the cops not to find out that you spent three hours in Helen's apartment this evening, and that you must have been there at the time she was killed."

"Blackmail, huh?" I wasn't shocked nor surprised.

Neither was she. She just grinned. "A girl has to get along, but I don't like the term, Tommy. Shall we call it tax instead? Everyone else is collecting taxes now. Why not Zella?"

I grinned faintly. "There's still a cop on guard upstairs. Cops have a way of dealing with blackmail."

SHE laughed, a little husky sound. "You're funny, Tommy, threatening me with a cop. This whole business is funny, even Helen's death." Her black eyes sparkled in the glow of the lights.

I took the grin off my lips. "Listen, Zella, you're getting out of your league on this. I'm too old a hand to let a muscle dancer put the finger on me."

"The great Tom Jayne." She pretended to be frightened. Then her voice hardened. "Look, sucker. You're in love, see. Don't be surprised. Half the town knows and is laughing at you. You're in love and papa turned thumbs down. Don't you think that your nice cute little gal friend would enjoy knowing that her big shot had spent three hours in Helen Trent's apartment? Sure she would, and her dad would pay me plenty for telling her. Think that over, boy scout."

I took half a step toward her. My impulse was to wrap my fingers around the white column of her throat, but I caught myself just in time. I'd never actually had the impulse to murder anyone before and it scared me. It scared her, too. I could read the fear

which leaped into her dark eyes, but she fought it down, managing a twisted smile.

"Gosh, you're human after all. A lot of people around this town won't believe it. But you can't frighten me, Tom. I owe you something and if I didn't need the dough so bad, I'd pay you off right now."

"Owe me?" I didn't get it.

Her face twisted up and she wasn't pretty any more. "Remember when Red Franks wanted you to defend him on that bank job?"

I thought back. Franks was a punk fighter who had turned holdup man when the going in the ring got too tough. I remembered. They'd wanted me to defend him and I'd turned it down.

"He was guilty as hell," I said. "I don't take that kind of business."

Her lip curled. "You only take the soft touches. Well, Red's doing ten to twenty. You could have sprung him if you would. You didn't, and he was a pal of mine."

I stared at her. That was the way with these people. She blamed me because her boy friend was doing a stretch and I hadn't taken his case. She didn't blame him for sticking up the bank or for getting caught.

"Look," I said. "If you try shooting off your face, I'll have the D. A. land on you like a ton of brick. Get smart and forget this whole thing."

"For a hundred grand."

I had to laugh at that, right in her face. I made a lot of money, but I spent it as fast as it came in. I didn't have a hundred grand at the moment, I didn't have a tenth of that much, but I couldn't tell her that. Your importance in this town is measured by dough, and only dough. I said:

"Look, I'm not buying you off, but I don't like trouble when it can be avoided. I might be able to get you a job."

"Don't hand me that. I don't like arguing. I want a hundred gees and I want them by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. The banks open at nine-thirty, so that should give you time. If I don't hear by then, I'll call up Mister Krouse. I've a hunch that he'll pay me for talking to the newspapers. Good night, Tom. Pleasant dreams."

POPSEY HAYS was big and soft and pink-looking. He didn't give the impression of being tough, but he hadn't fought his way up until he'd become one of the top-flight promoters of the country without being able to take care of himself.

I didn't know much about his record. There was a whisper that he'd been a member of the syndicate which had run the gambling boats off the coast before the attorney general cracked down on them. All I knew about him was that he ran the Center Arena and that he had a weakness for pretty girls. It was he who had written to Helen Trent, him that I'd been working for when I went out to her apartment that evening.

I wasn't surprised to find that he was waiting in the lobby when I got back to my apartment house, nor was I surprised to see the tall, hawk-nosed figure that sat in the chair close to Popsey's elbow. Hays never traveled anywhere without his bodyguard.

I nodded to them. "Come on upstairs if you want to talk."

They rose and followed me silently to the small elevator. Twice during the ascent Popsey opened his mouth, but I motioned him to wait until we reached my penthouse.

Once inside I set out a whiskey bottle and siphon, and then settled back into a chair. "Well?"

Hays exploded. "Did you get my letters?"

"Letters?" Then I shook my head. I hadn't been thinking about his letters for the last two hours. I'd been worrying about my own affairs. "No," I said, "and they weren't there. The cops turned the joint upside down."

He seemed relieved, but his face didn't relax. "That was a hell of a thing to do, to kill her. You must have been nuts."

I didn't even wonder how he knew that she was dead. This big man had connections all over town. There was little that could happen that he wouldn't hear about.

"I didn't kill her," I told him shortly. "That was a nice mess that you walked me into. I thought you were a friend of mine."

I didn't mean anything by the words. I was just sore, trying to take it out on someone, but he said, defensively, "I couldn't help it. They had me over a barrel and . . ."

I stared at him, my tired brain clicking into place. I had to be fast on the trigger to live, not the way you might think I mean. I had to hear everything that was said and guess the things that weren't. I was guessing now, but I could see that Hays was nervous.

"Wait a minute, Popsey. You sent me over to get those letters, but maybe there weren't any letters."

We looked at each other for a long moment. The big man drew a deep breath. "All right," he snarled. "There weren't any letters, but, damn you, you didn't have to kill her. I could break your neck with these hands. I could—"

"No, you couldn't." His hawk-nosed bodyguard had been shifting his position, but he stopped, for my hand had slipped into my coat and come out with the thirty-eight banker's special which I always carry. It was a little gun, the barrel not as long as my finger. You couldn't hit anything with it at any great distance, but for close work it's hard to beat, and we were standing close.

"Sit down," I told the hawk-nosed man, "and put your hands in your lap. If you move them, I'll give you a third eye."

HE DIDN'T like it, me talking to him that way. It hurt his pride, but he didn't like the look of the little gun either. He sat down and folded his hands in his lap.

Popsey Hays was staring at the gun. "Now," I said, "let's get this straight for once. There weren't any letters. You sent me over on some kind of a frame. Did you knock me out?"

Popsey looked at the gun, then shrugged and jerked a big thumb toward the hawk-nosed bodyguard. "Al did."

I looked at Al and mentally promised myself that some time I'd pay him back for that rap on the head, pay him with interest.

"What was the idea—to frame me with the Trent woman?"

The promoter nodded again. All the fight had gone out of him.

"And who thought up that little frame?"

He hesitated for a long minute. Finally he wet his lips and said nervously, "If he ever finds out who told you, I'll never hold another boxing show in this state."

"Who was it?" I repeated, but I had already guessed.

His answer did not surprise me when he said, "Austin Krouse."

I nodded, more to myself than him. "What did you get out of this, Popsey?"

He said, "Not a dime, not one thin dime. Look, tell me one thing straight. Did you kill Helen?"

I looked him straight in the eye. Somewhere in that big body was a heart although I'd doubted it a lot of times. "I didn't." I told him. "I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not, but I didn't."

He looked at me for a long time, then he stuck both of his big hands out in front of him. "When I find out who did, I'll—"

"Save the act." My voice was harsh. "I'm only interested in one thing. Just what did Krouse think this would buy him?"

The big man looked surprised. "Don't you get it? His girl is high-tempered. She's bound to marry you whether or no. But if he could show that you were in the Trent girl's place for hours, that private cops broke in and found you in her bed. . . ."

"I was on the floor when I woke up."

He looked surprised. "Hell," he said. "You were on the bed when we left. Al put you there."

I didn't get it. Neither apparently did he, and it seemed to worry him. After a minute he said, "Can we go now, or are you going to hold that gun on us all night?"

I'd forgotten about the gun. I put it back into my shoulder clip. The big man got up and his gun-guard followed. At the door he half turned.

"I'm sorry, Tommy, but you know how it is?"

"Sure," I said. "I know how it is," and watched the door close after them.

When they were gone, I started to laugh. I was thinking about the dancer, Zella. She thought she had something to sell to Austin Krouse. She thought she could sell him the information that I had spent three hours in Helen Trent's apartment. He already knew it, because he had arranged the whole thing. It was funny, as funny as the devil.

Then I stopped laughing. Krouse didn't know that I had been in the apartment at the time the Trent girl was murdered, or did he? How much did he know? I stopped laughing to wonder. I decided that maybe it wasn't so funny after all. Maybe it wasn't funny at all.

## CHAPTER III

SOMEONE was knocking on my apartment door. I opened an eye, looked at the rectangle of light which my bedroom window made, trying to guess what time it was. The watch on my wrist was stopped. The hands showed that it had stopped at ten minutes past six. It must have been broken when I fell in Trent's apartment. I hadn't noticed last night. I'd been too groggy.

I dragged out of bed, kicked into slippers, found a robe and trailed across the big living room to undo the door. Mary was standing outside.

The shock of seeing her went through me like a knife. I hadn't expected her to be there. She'd never come to my apartment before.

"Mary," I said, and just stood there. "Mary, darling."

"Can I come in?"

I stood aside for her to enter. I closed the door, automatically, without thought. My mind was still fuzzy with sleep and there was a tiny ache along the back of my skull.

She walked into the room and looked around curiously. She might have been there on a social call. "So this is where you live," she said.

"This is where I live." I looked at the big room, too. I'd never paid much attention to it before. I spent so little time at home. It was just a place to hang a hat and change your clothes.

She didn't look at me; instead she kept her eyes on the room. "They say that you can tell a lot about a man by the place in which he lives." She moved her right hand and the single stone ring that I had given her caught the light and threw it back in blue white rays.

"And what do you think of me from where I live, Miss Krouse?"

"Oh, Tommy."

She turned then and I took her in my arms. I could feel her heart beating against me. Her head was lowered so that her cheek was pressed against my shoulder. She wouldn't let me kiss her and after a minute she pushed me away.

"I had to come and warn you," she said.

"To warn me!" I couldn't have been so surprised. "Warn me?"

"They're going to arrest you for murder."

I laughed at that. "Arrest me . . . you've been having bad dreams, honey."

She said, not looking at me, but staring at the floor. "Don't bother to put on an act for me, Tom. I know all about it."

I caught her roughly by the shoul-

ders. I made her look up at me, and my voice was even harsher than I intended. "You know all about what? What are you talking about?"

She tried to look away, but I used my left hand under her small rounded chin to force her eyes upward to meet mine. "Look, Mary. I never lied to you, and I never will in this life. I don't know what you think you know. From the way that you're acting it must be something pretty bad."

She said lifelessly, "Men look at things differently than women, some women that is."

"Look at what?" My headache was growing. I thought that I knew what she was talking about, but I had to make her put it into words. You can't deny insinuation. I've found that out at law. You only justify them by denial.

She said, "Tommy. I'm no child. I know the facts of life, but somehow you seemed to be different. I guess that I expected too much. Every girl thinks that one man will be different."

"You're talking Greek."

SHE looked at me then, levelly, and there was a shade of contempt in her eyes which hadn't been there before. "It's bad enough that you were mixed up with that woman. It's worse that you killed her, but for me, it's terrible that you should pretend now that you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Listen," I said, tightening my grip on her shoulders. "Listen to me, Mary. I'm not going to try to tell you why I was at Helen Trent's apartment last night. You probably wouldn't believe what I'd say. I'm only going to tell you that the Trent woman was no more than an acquaintance, that I went there on what I thought was business, that I didn't kill her, and that I don't know who did."

The contempt was still in her eyes. "You expect me to believe that?"

"If you don't," I said, "heaven help me. Heaven help both of us, and we should both be thankful that we aren't married. Marriage has to be based on mutual trust. That's all. I'll never try to alibi my action to you. You can take my word, or not, that's up to you."

She didn't answer at once. Her face was very white, her eyes were the deepest blue that I'd ever seen. I hadn't realized until this moment that in her own way she was beautiful. I stood there with my heart up in my throat, making a lump which threatened to choke me.

I knew that this was the most important moment I had ever lived. The whole future depended on what she said, what her reaction to my words was.

But she did not answer, for someone knocked on the door.

The girl's eyes jumped up to meet mine. I was as startled as she was, but I thought faster. I jerked my head toward the bedroom. "In there." I whispered the words.

She hesitated for an instant, and I gave her a little push. I had no idea who was outside. It might be the cops, or newspaper men, or anyone. I couldn't let her be found there. I couldn't let her name be dragged down in the mud. I owed her that if nothing more.

I waited until she had disappeared into the bedroom before I moved across the living room and pulled open the hall door.

Austin Krouse was outside, looking immaculate in his freshly pressed business suit and white panama. He came in without waiting for an invitation, nor did he make any movement to shake hands or remove his hat.

I said, as I shut the door, "This is a surprise, and not a pleasant one."

"You're a cool customer," he told me. "A man in as deep trouble as you are should be up and stirring at half past ten."

I hadn't known what time it was, and I didn't care. I walked over to a small end table, got a cigarette from a teakwood box and lit it without of-

fering one to him. "Did you come up here to tell me that?"

He said, "I came up here to offer you a deal. After what's happened, I don't imagine that my daughter will care to see you, but women are strange sometimes and I'm not taking any chances."

I spoke without looking at him. "What's the deal?"

He smiled, and his teeth showed white and sharp-looking, almost too white for a man of his age. It gave him the appearance of a pleased wolf.

"I thought you'd be ready to listen. All right. Here's the deal. About one o'clock this afternoon the district attorney's office will issue a warrant for you for the murder of that Trent woman. Now I'm not trying to be too hard on you. In a way I suppose that murder is partly my fault. Therefore, I'll use my influence, and you might learn that it's considerable, if you promise never to see Mary or to communicate with her again."

"Nice of you."

He thought he had won, and he could afford to be generous. "I've got nothing against you personally, Jayne. I suspect that if you will swear that the woman pulled a gun on you and that she was killed while you tried to take it away from her, they'll listen to a manslaughter plea. That way the state will be saved money and you'll only get one to ten years. With your connections you shouldn't serve more than the minimum."

"Thank you," I said, "but I'll go on the stand and explain how you framed me. I'll have a witness who will back up my story, and last, I'll see your daughter as much and as often as she'll let me."

HIS face darkened. "You're not only a crook," he said. "You're a fool to boot and that's worse. You haven't got a chance. The cops found the gun which killed the Trent woman. It was in the alley, right under her window, and it had your prints on it. You don't think that my daughter will have anything to do with a murderer who killed his light of love?"

I said, "Let's stop that. You know that I've talked to Popsey Hays. You know that I'm wise that it was you who framed me into going to that apartment."

He laughed softly. "If you think that Hays will get up on the witness stand and testify against me, you are crazy. Go on, tell your story, and see who believes you."

"I will." The bedroom door had opened without either of us hearing it, and Mary had stepped in the room.

Krouse swung around, and his expression washed out, leaving his face strained and dead-looking as if he had seen a ghost.

"Mary!"

"Yes, father. What's this about your framing Tom? I think I'd enjoy hearing the story, enjoy hearing it from you."

He said hoarsely, "What are you doing here? How long have you been here?"

"Does it matter?"

The color came back into his face with a rush and for an instant I thought that he was going to have a stroke. "Does it matter? Does it matter? Have you lost your senses, child?"

"I'm not a child," she reminded him. "I'm twenty-one."

"You are," he said. "You're young for your age. It's my fault. I've kept you away from the world as much as I could. I realize now that I made a mistake and that you were ready to fall a prey to the first adventurer who came along."

I had to laugh. He sounded exactly like a heavy father in an old-fashioned melodrama. The next thing would be to offer to forgive her. And damned if he didn't.

"Come on home," he said. "Come with me and we'll forget that this ever happened. No one will ever know but us."

"Why, you old—" I stopped myself. After all, he was her father and she was a kid. It wasn't the nicest thing

in the world for me to tell him what I thought of him.

But the girl was doing the talking. "No," she said. "I'm not coming home. I don't know exactly what you did to Tom, but I'm beginning to guess. Whatever happened last night was your fault, not his. I'm staying with him."

The man stared at her as if he did not believe his ears. Then he took a step forward as if he meant to grasp her arm and drag her out of there, but I stepped sideways at the same moment and he found that he was facing me.

"You'd better go," I said. "There's nothing for you here."

He looked at me for a long moment with those ice-like eyes of his, and I had the sudden sense that it wasn't love of his daughter that had brought him here, that had made him frame me. It was his pride. He didn't actually love her. He didn't consider anyone but himself. It would hurt his standing to have his daughter marry a shady lawyer. That had prompted all his actions and it made him plead now.

"Listen to me, Mary. I don't know what this man has told you about me. He's probably dressed it up in a bundle of lies. I'll admit that I did send him to that apartment on a fool's errand and that my intention was to make it seem to you that he was tied up with that Trent woman. But that still does not excuse him for killing her. He woke up last night, realized that he was in a jam and killed her. You can't marry a murderer. Think of it. Why, he might get in another spot and kill you."

"Are you finished?" It was the girl and her voice was cool and level. She might have been talking to a stranger whom she had never met before, a stranger that she did not like very well.

He hesitated and she told him, "You might as well stop. I've made up my mind. I apologize to Tom for ever doubting him for a moment. I don't know whether he killed that woman or not. Some way it doesn't seem to make any difference. If he still wants me, I'm his."

"Want you!" I'd been watching them throw their emotions all over the place until I was doing it myself. None of this was real. It seemed to me that I was an actor. I expected an audience to burst out laughing, but somehow, I meant what I said even as I knew that they meant every word that had been uttered.

Krouse stared at us for a full moment. "That does it." He swung around toward the door. "You're no daughter of mine. "Stay with your murderer. Let the police pick you up when they arrest him."

He pulled the door open and was gone, slamming it behind him, leaving us to stare at each other in strained silence.

"Tom," she said, "Tom," and came toward me as if she were blind.

I took her in my arms. I didn't say anything and neither did she. We didn't need words. Then I let her go and moved over toward the phone. I called the D.A.'s office. I didn't give my name, but I asked for one of the deputies that was my friend. I wanted to check up on Krouse's story.

He wasn't lying. The deputy advised me as a friend to come down and give myself up. But I had no intention of doing that. I had a lot of enemies around town. As soon as I landed behind bars, they'd start sniping at me. I had to stay free. I had to have a chance to move around. I had to have a chance to find out things.

## CHAPTER IV

THERE was a good picture of me in the evening paper. It was a picture that had been taken six months ago at a dinner the bar association had given the mayor. I'd been chairman of the meeting that night, toastmaster, almost as honored as was the guest. Now there was an ugly word beneath the picture, the word murder.

The caption read: "Attorney Sought in Trent Murder." There was a lot about me on the front page. The paper gave a full review of my career and Mary read it over my shoulder as I sat on the edge of the auto court bed.

"You're an important guy," she said. She was trying to joke, but the words had a strained sound. Her face showed the strain too. I'd tried to get her to go home, to go to a hotel, to go anywhere.

But she wouldn't leave me. She wouldn't let me out of her sight. "If you go now," she said. "I'll never see you again."

"Sure you will," I told her. "Now listen, I have to go out and you can't go with me. Every cop in town is looking for me."

"That's the reason that I'm going. They'll never suspect a car with a woman driving."

I thought I was a good lawyer, and I'd convinced a lot of juries, but I couldn't convince this girl. She was taking over the play and she was running things. We left the auto court and walked across to where her car was parked. We'd been using her car all day. I hadn't dared go near the garage to get mine.

The court was one of those swanky affairs on Ventura and the less said about it the better. But it made a good hideout because every cop and newspaper man in the city thought that I'd ducked clear away from town.

We went into Hollywood over the pass. There wasn't as much late evening traffic as there had been before the tire shortage but there was still a lot. I rode at her side, my shoulders hunched and my light hat pulled way down over my eyes.

We stayed around thirty and she was careful with stop signs and traffic signals. It wouldn't do to be stopped by a motor cop now.

If she were nervous, she gave no sign. You'd have thought from the way she acted that she'd been driving murderers around big cities for years.

We pulled up before the Thomas Hotel and I got out, leaving her in the car. I told her that she had to stay there in case I needed to make a quick getaway. In reality, I didn't want her to take the chance of going into the hotel.

Once Hollywood had been filled with hotels like the Thomas, second-rate joints which catered to extras, musicians and struggling writers. Most of the joints are gone, but the Thomas survived, perched on the rim of the hill which overlooks the Boulevard.

It was just the spot that I would have picked for Olympic Jones to live. It had no desk clerk and the management never questioned its tenants as to their activities.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, made sure that my banker's special was in working order. I rapped on the door three times, then tried the knob.

Finally a sleepy voice called, "What gives?"

"Open up," I told him, "or I'll break in and wring your scrawny neck."

"Tom!" The pad-pad of his bare feet was audible through the thin panel. "Hold it."

I HEARD him fumble with the key, then the door was pulled open and I saw him standing there, a little figure in a long, old-fashioned striped night shirt of outing flannel. "Hi, palo. What are you running around for at this hour? You're supposed to be in jail."

I pushed my way in and shut the door. Not until then did he see the short-nosed gun in my hand. His little eyes got wide and careful. He backed away, trying to keep his distance, and managed a rather sickly grin.

"Why the gun, Tom?"

I said, "The better to make you talk, sweetheart."

I reached out with my free hand, caught the front of his night shirt, lifted him from his feet and tossed him over onto the sagging bed.

The little dice player let out a squawk. "Hey, you lug, what are you

trying to do, break my neck?"

"I won't try," I warned him. "I *will* do it unless you open up that face of yours and talk. You didn't just happen to walk in on me at Helen Trent's apartment the other night. You knew that my car had been there for three hours. What else do you know?"

The little man stopped smiling. His tongue came out to circle his lips as if they were suddenly too dry. "Honest, Tom, I don't know a thing."

"I think you do," I told him. "I'm not so dumb as you seem to think. I no more than get home from that apartment than my phone rings, and Zella Horn is trying to put the bite on me for killing Trent."

"I don't know her."

"You're a liar. You know her, as you know every other dancing dame in this town. And you know more than you've told about this setup. You know that I was framed into going to that apartment by Popsey Hays. Are you working for Popsey? I think I'll ask him."

Olympic Jones got scared. In the five years that I had known the little gambler I'd never seen him scared before. His skinny body began to tremble and his small, near-set eyes looked as if they might pop out of his face.

"Jeez, don't do that, Tom. Do you want to get me murdered? Popsey would cut my throat if he knew I was hanging around Zella."

I narrowed my eyes. "Hanging around Zella? What's Popsey got to do with Zella? I thought it was Helen Trent that occupied his attention?"

The little gambler waved his hand. "That's old stuff. He was washed up with Trent weeks ago, only she didn't know it, see, and when Krouse wanted this frame pulled on you, he used the Trent gal."

I was thinking rapidly. "Then maybe," I said slowly, "maybe Popsey wanted to get rid of Helen Trent. Maybe he saw his chance, with me lying there unconscious in the apartment. Maybe he gunned her down and then put on the act of wanting to find her killer."

Jones was staring at me with his eyes round and looking very big. "Say, maybe—" he broke off.

"Maybe what?" I snapped at him.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing except maybe you are right. At least it's worth thinking about."

WHEN I left the hotel, I went out the back way. Before I went, I penciled a note to Mary. It was a dirty trick, but I couldn't think of any other way. I had things to do and I didn't want her tagging around after me. I gave the note to Jones, told him to wait until ten minutes after I had gone and then take the note down to the girl in the Sterling coupé.

I felt that I could trust him that far. His curiousity was such that he'd go downstairs if only to find out who the girl was. I didn't want him to know, but I had no choice.

I ducked down the alley and hurried along toward the Boulevard praying that no prowl car cop would get curious and look me over carefully.

I had a bad moment when I finally found a cab. The driver showed unusual interest as he held open the rear door and I thought for a moment that he had recognized me. But he went around the hack and slid under the wheel.

He had the radio going, picking up a late news program, and the slide was open between the front and rear seat. I wasn't paying much attention until my name suddenly came in over the air.

"It's reported," the news broadcast said, "that Thomas Jayne, wanted for the murder of Helen Trent, was seen in Los Angeles late this evening. The owner of a motor court recognized a picture of Jayne in the evening paper as the picture of a man who had rented one of his cabins about noon. He immediately communicated with the police, but when they reached the court, Jayne was gone.

"At the time that he entered the

place he was accompanied by a woman. From the description, the police believe it was Mary Krouse, daughter of Austin Krouse, who has been reported engaged to Jayne. Police immediately got in touch with her father who refused all comment. The girl is not at home and her Sterling coupé is missing from the garage. . ."

The taxi man spoke without turning. "They'll never get that guy. He's smart, see, one of the smartest mouthpieces on the Coast."

I wished as he spoke that I could share his confidence. I wasn't feeling very smart. I was feeling like a trapped rabbit without a chance of fighting back. I knew enough to realize that it was only a matter of hours before they finally closed in on me.

One thing gave me comfort. I'd gotten rid of Mary just in time. If she had any sense, she'd go home. Maybe when I was finally caught, I could make them believe that she had never been with me. There was certainly no need to drag her further down into the mud.

The taxi man was still talking, but I did not hear what he said. I had an idea mulling around at the back of my head. It wasn't much of an idea, but it was the best I could think of at the moment.

When the cab stopped I got out, handed him two dollars and told him to keep the change. I was careful to keep my face in shadow as much as possible. He hadn't recognized me before but there was no need stretching luck further than necessary.

After he had pulled away I turned and walked down the street to the apartment house. Zella was surprised to see me when she opened the door. She tried to close it, but I had my foot in the way, and I was stronger than she was. I pushed the door open and went in.

There was no fear about her. Her black eyes were snapping as she stepped back. She'd been in bed and I could see the edge of blue pajamas under the edge of her robe.

"What are you doing here?"

I pretended to be surprised at the question. "I'm a little late," I said. "I had a date to bring you a hundred thousand dollars this morning."

HER eyes got a funny film over them and she glanced around as if she were afraid we'd be overheard. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I guessed then that he'd beaten me there. Mary must have made the phone call within a couple of minutes of getting my note. I hadn't expected such quick action, but that was okay. The little gun was in my overcoat pocket, my fingers wrapped around it.

"Stop stalling," I told her. "You wanted to make a deal with me last night, Zella, and I'd keep it if it would do me any good. The only trouble is that it wouldn't. The cops are already looking all over town for me."

She muttered something about it's not being her fault, and told me to get out.

I just laughed. "Don't be sore, Zella. You put your price too high last night. I couldn't have paid a hundred grand if I'd wanted to. But I might have paid you something, because Olympic Jones hadn't told me then that Popsey Hays was interested in you, not in Helen Trent."

Her eyes widened. "The little rat," she breathed, "the little rat talks too much."

I nodded. "So maybe instead of trying to shake me down, you should have tried your game on Popsey. He's got more money than I have and a hell of a lot more reason for wanting to kill Helen Trent. It's sometimes hard to get rid of a woman like that when you're tired of her."

Her voice was almost toneless when she said, "Go on. What are you trying to say?"

"I've said enough," I told her. "I don't know why I take the trouble to warn you. Maybe I like your looks. Maybe I hate to see you get hurt. Who are you trying to protect by

making me into a murderer, Popsey Hays or Olympic Jones?"

She said shrilly, "You're crazy."

"Am I?" I sounded confident. "I think not. You've been playing around with Popsey for some time and Helen Trent didn't like it. She got sore. She helped Popsey frame me last night, but after I'd been knocked cold, she dragged me out of her bed and started to drag me out of her apartment.

"When the private cops broke in, she was going to laugh in their faces, to laugh at Popsey, and tell him that he could make his peace with Austin Krouse any way he chose. Yes, that was what she meant to do, only she got caught doing it and someone killed her.

"Who was it, Zella? Was it Popsey?" I kept talking. It all sounded right, sounded logical. I made it sound that way, but something about the picture was very wrong.

"No," she said. "Popsey didn't kill her. You're crazy. You're—"

"Who didn't I kill?" Popsey Hays had pushed the bedroom door open and stepped forward. He was followed closely by his hawk-nosed bodyguard and both of them gave me their full attention even though Popsey's question was directed at the girl.

## CHAPTER V

I SMILED at him faintly. I tried to act as if I wasn't scared, and it was the hardest acting that I'd ever done. "Hello, Hays. We were just talking about you."

"I see you were." He took another step forward. There wasn't a gun in sight, but I knew that it wouldn't be long before one showed up if I made a wrong move. I had to handle this just right if I had a chance at all.

"Your girl friend tried to shake a hundred grand out of me last night," I told him.

The words caught him by surprise. "She what?" He shifted his attention to the girl.

Her voice dripped honey when she said, "A girl has to look out for herself, Popsey."

"I'm beginning to think that you're looking out for yourself a little too well."

She widened her eyes, trying to look puzzled. "Why, Popsey. I don't know what you mean."

I said, "Don't play dumb. You know that you were just letting me know that Hays killed the Trent woman."

"Why, you—" She swung on me like a cat. "I'll—" She heaved forward, her long red nails already reaching for my face. She'd have probably cut it up if Hays hadn't shot out one big hand to grab her shoulder.

"Wait a minute, supposing you let me get in on this little argument."

"He's lying," she sobbed, trying to shake loose, still trying to get at me.

"Sure," I said. "I'm lying. What was it you offered to sell me last night if it wasn't the information that Popsey had killed Helen Trent because she was causing trouble between you?"

Hays said, "Now wait, Tom. I've already admitted to you that I framed you into going up to Helen's apartment last night. I'll even admit that I was having trouble with Helen because I was washed up, all through, ready to quit. But I didn't kill her, so help me."

"Then who killed her? Krouse?"

Popsey shook his head. "I thought of that too," he admitted. "I figured that maybe he thought he would make it good, that he sneaked up to the apartment while he knew you were still unconscious, put two bullets in Helen and wrapped your fingers around the gun before he dropped it out of the window."

"Sure," the big man told me, "it was found in the alley, right under Helen's window, with your prints on it. You knew that."

I knew it. Krouse had told me that morning, but I'd been so busy with other things that I hadn't thought much about it. I was thinking about

it now, and remembering something else. The cops had searched the alley the night before, searched it thoroughly. They'd done the searching while I was still at the apartment, and they couldn't have missed the gun unless it had been dropped there afterward.

I walked to the window of the room in which we stood and looked out. I stood there for maybe a full minute, then I turned around slowly.

Zella was watching me, Zella must have read the message that was in my eyes, for suddenly she said. "No, no. . ."

THE words burst from her before she had time for thought. Hays didn't understand. I did. I said, "So that's it. So you killed her, Zella. She was in your way. You wanted Popsey, and Helen Trent was in your way. You knew all about the plan to frame me. You knew that I'd be out cold on her bed, so you slipped upstairs after Popsey and his man had gone, and you shot her.

"Then you dragged me off the bed and into the front room so that if anyone should come in before I came to, they'd think Helen and I had had a fight, that I'd shot her and that before she'd died, she'd managed to conk me on the head.

"But you took the gun, after getting my fingerprints on it. Why did you take it, because you were afraid that when I came too and saw it, I'd wipe my prints from the grip?"

"No . . ."

"Yes, your apartment is right under Helen's. A gun thrown from this window would fall about the same place that a gun tossed from the floor above would drop."

"Popsey," she'd turned away from me and was appealing to the big man. "Take care of him, Popsey. Don't let the police get me. I did it for us. You said that we had to get rid of her somehow before we could go on."

Hays surprised even his bodyguard by stepping forward and slapping her hard across the cheek. "You rat," he snarled. "You murdering little rat."

She jumped back around the divan, I thought in fear of him. Too late I realized my mistake, for her hand shot down behind one of the pillows and came out with a gun.

"All right," she said, and her face had changed, thinned down until her bones stood out against the tautness of her skin. "I know where I stand now. You're going out, do you understand, you're all going out."

I thought that it was she who fired. The shot made a lot of sound in the narrow confines of the room. I stood there, my eyes on her, waiting for a bullet which did not come. I saw her crumple rather than fall.

Then I turned around. I saw Mary first, standing in the doorway and then I saw Olympic Jones at her side, with a gun in his hand, and I knew it was he who fired.

The hawk-nosed guard had scooped up Zella's gun. I didn't know what he intended to do. Probably nothing, for the play was about over. But I wasn't taking chances and I owed him something for the blow on the head which he had given me the night before.

I returned it, using my banker's special. I wished, even as I struck, that the barrel had been longer and heavier. Then I swung around, covering Popsey Hays in case he got ideas. But he hadn't moved. He was staring downward at Zella's body like a man that was living through a bad dream.

I left him there, looking down at her and walked over to the doorway. "Thanks for calling Hays on the phone so promptly." I told Mary. I had a lot of other things I wanted to say, but not there.

"She didn't make the call," Jones told me. "I did."

"You?" I looked at him, and he grinned. "Sure, I opened that note as soon as you left. When I saw what it said I went down and used the hall phone. I figured that you'd want Hays over here in a hurry."

I didn't thank him. It made me sore that he had opened the note. "What

are you doing here?"

He jerked his thumb toward Mary. "It's her fault. When I got out to the car, she read the note, saw where you'd said to tell Hays to come, and insisted that we drive out here. I argued with her. I even hid the car keys, but it didn't do any good. Lucky for you it didn't. If I hadn't been here to shoot that dame she'd have blasted you for fair."

I knew he was telling the truth, but I was still sore at him. "You had a reason for shooting her," I accused. "You'd been mixed up in this thing a lot deeper than you let on. Maybe you shot to close her mouth."

He wasn't put out by the accusation. He just winked. "That was a swell idea, getting Popsey out here and getting them both accusing each other."

I didn't tell him that when I'd written the note, I'd thought Hays was guilty. It wasn't any of his business. I just turned around and walking over to the phone, called the cops.

Mary and I were married at Las Vegas and believe it or not, her old man went along. It wasn't that he approved of me any more than he had at first, but he was smart enough to know when he was licked and he had to save his face by being present and apparently giving his consent.

But he wasn't the best man. Olympic Jones was. Olympic Jones crashed the wedding. I don't know how he ever found out that it was going to take place. We told no one, but when we showed up at the marriage chapel, there he was, morning coat, grey trousers and even a carnation in his button hole.

I wasn't going to let him in, but he warned me that it wouldn't be legal unless he was there to boss the job. He almost stole the show from the minister and I'm damned, he kissed the bride before I could.

I think that I'll buy him a railroad ticket for Florida. There's a lot of things about the little guy that I don't understand, but I'll feel safer if he's three thousand miles away.

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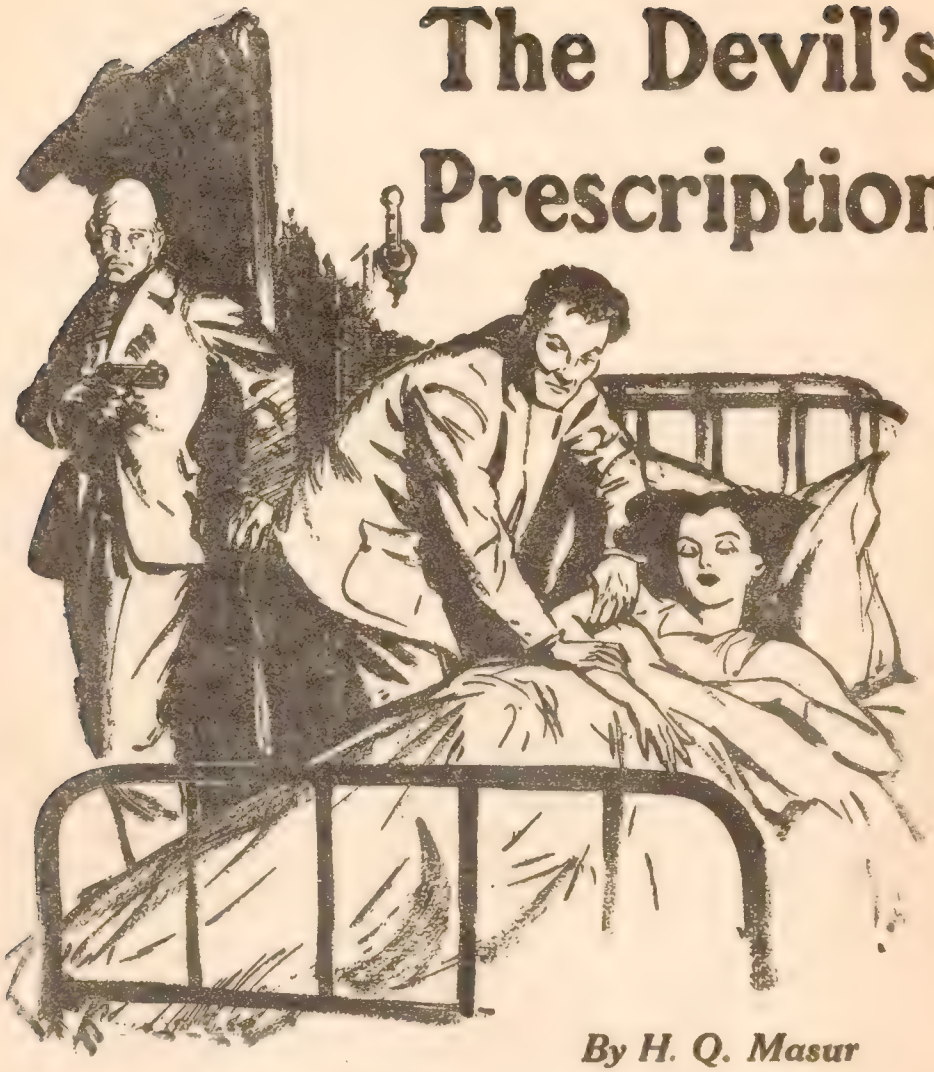
# The Devil's Prescription



*By H. Q. Masur*

★ ★ ★

*Detective George Lilac needed more than bullet medicine when he went on the trail of the missing nurse. For he found himself trapped in the maze of a wily doctor—a doctor whose pills were lead and whose prescriptions spelled death.*

★ ★ ★

THE morgue attendant was a wizened little specimen, abandoned by nature and soured by his profession. He took the sheet in his bony fingers and drew it back over the marble slab.

"That's her, Mr. Lilac," he said.

The city morgue is one place on this earth to avoid if you can.

I couldn't.

I had been promised a hundred dollars to find the wandering daughter of a Midwestern tool manufacturer. I never did get the hundred dollars. But then I never did find the girl, either. She turned up somewhere in Detroit.

In the morgue, however, I found another client.

There were two of us on this tour. Myself and a girl. She had preceded me into the place by a matter of seconds, and in a small, subdued voice had asked to see any recent female arrivals. I heard her gasp and I saw her head turn swiftly away.

I glanced down at the corpse. The dead girl might have been pretty at one time, but there was no trace of that now in the bloated face with its wrinkled blue skin. Blonde hair straggled in pale coarse strings over the edge of the marble slab.

"Fished her out of the bay this morning," the attendant said.

She seemed too tall for the girl I was hunting, but I wanted to make sure.

"Let's see her clothes."

His snag-toothed mouth split open in a grin. "Ain't none, Mr. Lilac, not a stitch. They found her just like that."

I sighed, turned away, and walked out into the street, preoccupied. A hand plucked at my sleeve. I turned around and it was the girl who had entered the morgue just ahead of me.

"I heard the attendant call you Mr. Lilac," she said. "Are you *the* Mr. Lilac—George Lilac?"

I admitted the allegation.

Back in my kid days the name Lilac had made me the target for schoolboy jibes. It should have been a handicap, but it wasn't. Constant defense of my manhood developed me into more than a fair rough-and-tumble fighter. An asset that sometimes comes in mighty handy in my business.

The girl said: "Could you—I mean, would you help me?"

"That depends on a lot of things, Miss —"

"Meredith—Emily Meredith."

I looked at her more carefully and liked what I saw. Nice figure, nice complexion, hair the shining black of polished gun metal, earnest cat-gray eyes that probably smiled a lot when she wasn't worrying.

I took her arm and piloted her along the street.

"Who were you looking for back there?" I asked.

"My sister—Sue."

"Ah, and when did she disappear?"

"Three days ago."

I said: "Ah, and that girl didn't—"

"No, it wasn't Sue," she supplied swiftly. "Sue has dark hair, like mine."

"Maybe she ran off with her boy friend."

The girl stopped walking and grabbed my arm so that she could face me. Her lips were thin and she shook her head firmly. "It's nothing as easy as all that, Mr. Lilac. She disappeared under suspicious circumstances."

I SAW the bar on the corner and I led her inside to a booth. Seated with a couple of beers in front of us, I asked her to start from the beginning.

She said: "Sue just received her nursing diploma. She was waiting for an appointment to some hospital when this doctor called and asked if she would like a private job. She—"

"What doctor?"

"Ewing—Dr. Gleason Ewing. I think he's supposed to be a society doctor. Anyway, she went to his office, that was three days ago, and I haven't heard from her since."

"Did you call Dr. Ewing?"

"I did more than that. I went to see him."

"And—"

"He denied having sent for her. He must have been lying because Sue couldn't possibly have made up such a story."

"Have you got a picture of Sue?"

She nodded and got a snapshot of a slim, dark-haired girl out of her purse. I looked at it and stuck it in my pocket and got up on my feet and said:

"Suppose we adjourn to your apartment. I'd like to look at Sue's belongings. There might be some letter or some clue about her recent activities."

It was a nice two and half room

suite, tastefully furnished. I didn't notice that, though, right away. The man who was sprawled out on the couch drew my attention first. He was very fat, the buttons on his dark, sloppy vest straining under the bulge of a great paunch. His red jowls hung down over his collar and his three chins marched in single file to a tiny flowered tie knot. He had a big club-like nose, and above the nose glittered a pair of small dark parrot eyes.

The jacket of his suit hung loosely, like a topcoat. He took his hand out of the pocket and there was a large, blue-black automatic in it. At the sight of me behind the girl his mouth sagged open and he seemed to be considering what to say.

"One squawk by either of you and you'll get some of what I got in my hand."

Emily's face sickened. She tried to say something, but it got plugged in her throat.

The fat man lumbered to his feet. There was no crease whatever in his baggy trousers. He stared at me and the lids blinked over the small parrot eyes. He jerked the automatic.

"Who are you?"

I let the air go out of my lungs and piped in a squeaking voice: "Her—her boy friend."

"Would you like some of this?" He patted the gun with his free hand.

I swallowed three times and shook my head. If he thought I was scared he might get careless.

"Then do as I say and maybe you'll die from natural causes."

That struck him funny. I couldn't hear him laugh but I could see his stomach shaking. He stopped laughing and took out a box of licorice squares and popped one into his mouth.

Emily said in a small voice: "What do you want?"

"You'll see, you'll see. Sit down and take it easy. We got to wait until dark anyway."

"If you'll excuse me," I stammered, "I have an appointment." I backed away.

"No, no, bub," he said softly. "Sit down. From here on all appointments are cancelled. You're going away with me. I got a car downstairs and a boat at the Bay Point. Come now, sit down, both of you."

"This—this is illegal," I blurted.

"Sure. Write your Congressman and tell him about it. I'm a patient man, sir, up to a point. Squat. Dump yourself into that chair."

The girl's eyes were stunned. She gazed at me blankly. "I'm sorry I got you into this, George. I—I didn't know we had company."

"Quite all right," I said.

I perched myself on the edge of a straight spindle chair with my hands hanging loosely at my sides. I coughed twice and started sniffing through my nose as though I had a cold. Then I reached into my back pocket, ostensibly for a handkerchief. I got one out, but I got something else out with it.

The derringer was no larger than my fist. I kept it covered with the handkerchief and lifted it toward my face.

THE fat man's eyes were keeping casual guard over me. He thought I was going to blow my nose. Accurate shooting with a tiny weapon like the derringer is almost impossible. But he certainly was not more than seven feet away and he made a very nice target.

I said: "Did you know that all fat men die early?"

"Huh!" The eyes flickered dumbly.

"Yes," I went on softly, "all that suet around your heart puts too much strain on it," and then I squeezed the trigger.

I didn't want to kill him. A dead man isn't good for much information. Neither did I want him alive enough to bring the automatic into play. All in all, considering the position I was in it was pretty nice shooting.

Three noises followed in rapid succession.

The thin crack of the derringer. A surprised bellow of pain from the fat

man. A deep-throated roar from the automatic.

I saw the muzzle blast stab out in a flash of crimson. The slug would have torn my head off. But he missed me. He missed because I had lunged at him out of the chair, scudding low against the floor like a duck taking off.

I came up under the big gun, grappling for it with both hands. It was like taking candy from a baby. The bullet had caught him somewhere along the arm and splintered the bone.

I laid the automatic against the side of his head and his lungs collapsed with a soft *whoosh* like a broken organ bellows and he fell asleep.

Emily had her cheeks vised tightly between her palms and her red lips made a perfect O. Her gray eyes were bright with excitement.

"You see," I told her, grinning, "it's easy. All you need is the equipment, a certain dumbness, and a bit of luck."

"Dumbness?" she queried.

"Sure. A smart man never takes chances. He always plays it safe. But then I never pretended to be overly bright and maybe that's why I'm in this business."

Enough with the chatter. I went to work on the fat man. I emptied his pockets, revealing a cheap watch, fourteen dollars in cash, thirty cents in silver and a check for five hundred dollars signed by Douglas Calvert. The name clicked against my memory. Calvert . . . Calvert . . . and then I had it. A playboy who had burned the town plenty until almost a year ago, but had somehow dropped out of the public eye.

I saw then that the check was drawn to the order of Dr. Gleason Ewing. My interest quickened. The loose ends were tying in. I turned the check over. On the back, Dr. Gleason Ewing had endorsed it.

The fat man stirred and grunted. I glanced down at the bluish bruise along the side of his face. I tried his breast pocket and found a folded square of paper. Emily's teeth were chattering. She was shaking like a pair of clappers.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm scared."

"What! Come, not now when we have the upper hand."

Her eyes grew hazy. "Oh, no, you don't understand. It's Sue I'm scared about. All this has something to do with her, I'm sure."

I gave her a reassuring smile. "Keep your chin up. George Lilac is on the case."

I unfolded the square of paper and read:

*Watley:*

*This afternoon. Get her out of town. And do whatever's necessary to keep her quiet. Even the limit.*

The note was not signed. I stuck it away in my pocket.

The fat man blinked and sat up, and clutched his wounded wing with a pudgy paw. His mouth was closed and his fleshy face had the peculiar grayish cast of putty rolled soft between the palms. From rounded lids the small parrot eyes stared fixedly at me with absolutely no trace of human expression.

I said: "Well, Watley, kidnapping is a Federal rap. And you know the penalty for that. Maybe you'd better loosen your gums and start spilling."

He kept staring at me and not a muscle twitched in his face. I pointed the gun squarely at his heart.

"I can kill you in defense of Miss Meredith's home. The cops would pin a medal on me. Brave citizen routs thug."

Still no response.

"What do you think Dr. Ewing will say when he learns how you botched this job?"

"You're off your trolley," he observed.

"Ah, Watley," I wriggled a finger at him, "you have never mastered the fine art of prevarication. You're fib-

bing." To Emily I said: "Have you any rope, my dear?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Then cut a sheet into thick strips and bring them here. We're going to put our friend on ice for a while. I hope you won't mind, Watley."

The corners of his thick mouth were pulled down in a sullen scowl. He did not say anything.

I TOOK the sheet strips that Emily brought me, excused myself to the fat man, and tapped him behind the ear, still using his own automatic. It was a very effective sap. He groaned and sagged back on the couch. I trussed him neatly. I tied his hands behind his back, connecting the bonds as close to his ankles as I could pull them. When consciousness returned he would be decidedly uncomfortable.

"Aren't you going to call the police?" Emily asked.

"Not yet. They'd only take him down to headquarters and sweat him a bit, and then maybe some smart shyster would get out a writ of *habeas* or some soft-hearted jurist would grant him a bail bond, and that, my dear, would be the end of our fat friend, Mr. Watley."

Emily nodded. "Do you want to go through Sue's things?"

"Not any more. I think we're on the track now."

I hustled her out of the apartment, gave her the key to my hotel room and told her to lock herself in. I saw her to a cab, promised to let her hear from me, and headed toward the Professional Building.

The office of Dr. Gleason Ewing was an elaborate affair. In the paneled reception room, behind a carved desk, sat a long-faced spinster with mousy hair, tortoise shell glasses, a bony nose and a nurse's uniform. No patients were waiting in the spacious leather chairs.

Crossing over to the desk, hat in hand, I sparkled a smile at her. Her face almost cracked in an attempt to return it.

"Dr. Ewing, please," I said.

Flustered, she coyly primped her hair, but not even Charles of the Ritz could have done it much good.

"Name?"

"Carlton L. Thorndyke, II," I announced.

She was duly impressed. So was I.

"These aren't the doctor's office hours, but he'll be back in about an hour." She shook her head hopefully. "You wouldn't care to wait, would you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. You see I'm an old patient of the doctor's. This is more in the nature of a social call. I've been away in South America and just got back." I kept the affable smile pinned on my mouth. "By the way, I'd like to locate another patient of the doctor's—Doug Calvert."

Color stained her high cheekbones and she tipped her head demurely. I doubt if she'd been looked at by a man in quite this way in twenty years. I believe I could have borrowed money from her.

"Why, yes," she gave out, "Dr. Ewing is treating Mrs. Calvert. They live at 14 Chelsea Drive, Riverside."

Riverside was the town's most exclusive suburb. I put concern into my face and my voice.

"What's wrong with Mrs. Calvert, is she very ill?"

"I believe so. I don't know much about the outside cases."

"Private nurse and all that?"

"Oh, yes, the doctor interviewed some girls here several days ago."

I had what I needed. I rewarded her with a pat on the cheek, laid a chocolate kiss on the desk, and got out of there. . .

The Calvert shack, done in red brick, set back on a rolling expanse of lush green turf, was a good imitation of an Elizabethan manor house. I rolled my coupé along the graveled drive, braked it under an arched portico, and mounting the steps, rang the bell.

My first look at the butler who

opened the door almost bowled me over.

I saw a pair of broad shoulders, a Gibraltar jaw, bluish jowls and pig-like eyes. I think he was just as surprised to see me. And somewhat embarrassed, too, because of the powder blue, gold-braided uniform he was sporting on his huge torso.

"Lilac," he muttered.

"Barker," I said.

Gregory Barker was a private dick, not always ethical in his practices, whom I'd run up against on several occasions. He was so shocked he didn't try to slam the door in my face. I pushed through before he'd fully recovered.

"You can't come in here, Lilac," he said.

"I am in."

"Then you'll have to get out."

"Sure," I said, "but not until after I've looked around a bit."

Barker wet his little mouth. "No rough-house here, Lilac."

"That's up to you." And I started toward the stairway.

With apelike agility Barker hopped in front of me, and his arms, hanging almost to his knees, terminated in a pair of hairy hooks.

"Come now, Barker," I said softly, "you're playing at my game. Get out of the way or you'll get hurt."

"I got orders, Lilac. This isn't a saloon."

I DIDN'T say another word. I didn't hit him on the jaw. That would have been like punching the side of Radio City. I clunked my fist into his stomach, burying it almost to the wrist. His face got purple, he grunted, he staggered back against a statue of Psyche, and both of them went down for the count. Barker didn't break. But Psyche did. With one hell of a racket.

Almost immediately two men came down the wide stairway. I recognized Douglas Calvert right away. He had a good-looking but petulant face, an athletic build, and a mop of sandy hair. The other man was close to seven feet tall, correspondingly thin, with a pointed face and a bald conical skull that gleamed under the light.

Calvert watched Barker get to his feet. His eyes were hard and brittle. He said: "What is this, Barker? Who is this man?"

Barker told them.

"Well," demanded Calvert, "what do you want?"

"I've come," I said, "to see the nurse who's attending Mrs. Calvert."

"That's impossible."

I smiled grimly. "Why?"

"Because she was discharged yesterday."

"And her name?"

He bit his lip. "Miss—Miss Brown."

"I'm afraid that won't do at all," I said. "You'll have to let me talk to your wife."

Calvert s w a l l o w e d, nervously rubbed his fingertips. The tall man spoke:

"That's quite out of the question."

"Who says so?"

"I do, sir. I'm Dr. Ewing, her physician. Mrs. Calvert is an ill woman, extremely ill. I have forbidden any visitors to enter her room."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to make an exception in my case."

"Look here, Lilac," stuck in Barker, "if he says you can't go up there you can't. What do you want to do, fight your way up there?"

I stared at him. I stared at them all. I said very slowly:

"I'll go to the police and get a warrant to search the house."

The doctor grinned. "You don't say. On what grounds, may I ask?"

My answer cleaned the smile off his face and rocked them all back on their heels.

"On the charge that somebody murdered the nurse, Miss Sue Meredith, and buried her body in the cellar."

It gave them a terrific wallop. I was talking through my hat, of course, because actually I suspected nothing of the sort. And yet the shock of it drew a nice reaction. Calvert's face

turned dead white. Barker started sweating. The doctor stiffened like a length of wooden planking.

"That won't do, Lilac." Barker gave an unnatural laugh. "It won't do at all. You can't blackmail us with threats."

"Fantastic!" Dr. Ewing was shaking his long narrow head. "The man belongs in a psycopathic ward."

Douglas Calvert took a grim forward step and his voice cracked out on a sharp, almost hysterical note:

"Get out! Get out!"

I smiled at them. "Gentlemen," I said, "deep in my heart I'm a man of peace, not violence. But I have a stubborn nature. I came here intending to talk to Mrs. Calvert or her nurse. I still want to talk to either one of them. If you think you can put me out you're quite welcome to have a go at it. However—"

I suppose I should have expected what came. Barker was not a man to abide by the Marquis of Queensberry rules. He had sidled behind me and I don't know what he hit me with, but it must have been a large chunk of the Equitable Building, because it felt like the end of the world. My consciousness was swallowed in a sudden pit of darkness.

I had it coming to me. I knew I had them on the run. Something was in the wind, something big, and they were worried.

It was dark when I came around. My head was swollen, my tongue was too big for my mouth, and an army of spiders had woven cobwebs around my brain.

THEY weren't so clever at that. In the long run it might have been wiser to weight me with lead and drop me into the river. But they didn't. They simply dumped me in an alley at the edge of the city. I staggered to my feet and felt the needle-sharp pain in my arm. So that was it. That was why I'd been out so long. Neat and simple. A hypodermic.

I remembered the stuff in my pocket then, and made a swift search for it. Both the check and the note to the fat man were gone. I used some language and fished for my money. They had left that intact.

Out on the street I flagged down a cab and gave him the address of my hotel.

I was lucky. My big mistake had been in blundering into the Calvert home and shooting off my mouth. A more subtle approach might have produced better results. But I was lucky. In this business when you make a mistake you sometimes don't get a second try.

I was standing in front of my hotel door and knocking on it and whispering softly:

"Open up, Emily, it's Lilac."

I waited a second and there was no answer. I didn't feel any apprehension yet, so I knocked again, this time a little louder. My hand was on the knob and I twisted it and the door swung loosely inward. That was bad. It should have been locked.

With the dim hall light behind me, I stood like that in the doorway, outlined in sharp relief, a perfect target for anybody in the room. But in that first instant nobody had fired so I didn't jump back. I reached for the light switch, snapped it on and nothing happened. The room remained as dark as the inside of a cow.

There were some matches in the desk on the other side of the room and I crossed over for them and that's when I stumbled against the man.

He was in the exact center of the room and he swayed back as I struck him. I put my arms around him to keep from falling. He didn't say a word and neither did I. My heart had lurched violently against my ribs and the pulse was hammering hard in my temples. I suppose it's the unknown but all humans have an instinctive fear of the darkness, the kind of fear that makes sentries shoot at falling leaves.

It didn't take as long as the tell'ng

to get a gun into my hand and to drop low on one knee. The room was still deadly quiet. Quiet except for my own breathing which sounded like a broken track on a sound film.

Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing.

I faded back, groped for the matches and struck one.

Mr. Watley, the fat man, was hanging by his neck from the chandelier. No wonder the light had broken.

He was hanging and swinging in short half circles from the impetus I had given his body. He was dangling from a wire coat hanger that had been ingeniously twisted about his throat. His face had a dull bluish cast and his eyes seemed about ready to pop out of their sockets. From the flickering light of the match, a huge grotesque shadow did a weird dance along the wall.

I doused the match and got some light from the bulb in the bathroom. Emily Meredith had disappeared; at least she wasn't there. I knew for I searched under the bed and in the closets.

Well, Watley was dead, and the only thing I objected to about that was that he'd been dumped here in my room. I suppose the proper thing would have been to cut him down, but I didn't feel like it, and neither did I feel like hanging around there any longer.

So I left. But where to go? What to do?

One thing I knew for certain, Emily Meredith was in serious danger. These boys played for keeps. What they'd done to Watley proved that.

Down in the lobby I stuffed myself into a telephone booth and called Amelia Fairchild. Amelia was forty and fat and loquacious. She was the society editor on the *Evening Bugle* and knew as much about the upper classes as anyone.

There was a party going on in her flat. I could tell from the noise, the blaring radio, the tinkle of glasses, the hum of conversation.

"George Lilac, dear boy," she gushed. "Delighted you called. Hurry over, my pet, there are oodles of girls here dying to meet you."

"Not now, Amelia," I said, "I want to talk to you, serious."

"Hold it." She must have closed a door because the bedlam died out. "What is it, George?"

"Information. What can you tell me about Dr. Gleason Ewing?"

She trilled two octaves of laughter. "Gleason is a charming man, reticent about his private life, with a medical practise that will always keep him out of the bread line. Why, George? What is it? Have you any dirt for me?"

"Not yet," I told her, "but you'll be the first to get it if I dig any up. One more, Amelia. Can you dish me anything on Douglas Calvert?"

"My!" she said, "but you are going into the higher brackets. Just what do you want to know?"

"A brief synopsis of his recent activities."

"Well, he's married you know, some little girl he met at a skiing resort, nobody important. She doesn't mix in society much. He's stopped burning the candle two ways. His daddy left him a couple of million when he was twenty-one, and he was supposed to get another couple of million after he'd been married a full year to prove that he could settle down. Does that help, George?"

"It may. Good-bye, Amelia."

I hung up, stood chewing my lip. There was no help for it. Regardless of my reception, I had to pay the Calvert residence another visit.

THE house was a great hulking shadow under the moon. Here and there a hall light burned dimly. There was a serenity about the place, at least on the surface, but underneath I sensed there lurked something cold and ominous.

I knew there were a couple of cars in the garage behind the house, but I was willing to make a bet that the

chauffeur had been canned, fired together with all the rest of the servants. It might have been a good idea to look into the garage first, but curiosity pulled me to the house instead.

I tested the vines and trelliswork that crawled up the side of the house and decided to risk it. I weigh close to a hundred and eighty and there were times when I expected the whole flimsy structure to cave under me. But it didn't. I reached a narrow ledge and hugged the side of the building until I could make my way to a window.

I saw a bed inside and somebody was sleeping on the bed. It was warm and the window was opened. I had to go through it sideways, and when I turned around the man was sitting up in the bed, grinning at me. Light from the moon glinted on the blue metal barrel of an automatic.

The man was Barker. He said softly:

"You never learn, do you, Lilac? You know of course that I could shoot now and get away with it clean as soap."

I gave him back his grin.

"But you won't," I told him.

His heavy brows went up. "Why not? What's to stop me?"

I waved my hand. "Everything. It would cause an investigation and that's the one thing you people don't want."

He sucked on his tooth and said suddenly: "Look, boy, what is it you want?"

There was something so naive in his question, and something so plaintive in the way he asked it, that I stared at him in surprise. I could see he wasn't kidding.

"You don't really know, do you, Barker?"

He shook his head. "Know? Know what?"

"You're working here, aren't you? Calvert certainly didn't hire you as a companion. I'll make a deal with you, Barker. You tell me your angle and maybe I'll tell you mine."

"I haven't any angle," he shrugged. "My job is simply to keep undesirable visitors away from the house." His shifty eyes suddenly seemed to glitter in the dim light. "And you, boy, just what are you after? What's up, Lilac? It must be big if you're handling it personally. You know me, boy. If there's a chance to make a stray buck I'd—"

Sure, I knew. I knew that even his own client couldn't trust him. Neither could I. And that's why I had no mercy. He'd been so eager to learn what I had to say that he'd dropped his guard and the big automatic was resting on the lap of his candy-striped pyjamas. I was pretty close to him then, and when I hit him it was a pile-driver blow, a Sunday punch, and he folded up under it like a gunny sack.

I wrapped him up in the sheets, tying him as tight as a mummy, then I stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth and looped a towel over it.

If the same thing happened to Barker that happened to Watley it would be no hair off the back of my neck and I don't think I'd shed any tears.

I tiptoed down the hallway to the front of the house. That should be the door to the big master bedroom on that floor. It was locked and I hoped one of my fancy keys would open it.

I breathed easier. My second key turned and the door slid quietly open.

My eyes were better accustomed to the darkness now, but I couldn't see a thing. The shades were drawn. The room was insufferably hot and beads of perspiration formed above my lips.

SILENTLY, very slowly, I moved deeper into the room. As my pupils expanded I could make out the white, boxlike shape on a bed. I got out a match and scratched it. A pale, gentle-faced girl lay on the bed, yellow hair spread over the pillow. She was breathing deeply, too deeply it seemed,

and her skin had an almost waxen pallor.

I put my hand on her shoulder and shook it. She did not respond. Her body was heavy, wooden, terribly lethargic. My lips sucked in grimly. I lifted the sleeve of her night dress and saw the tiny crimson marks made by a hypodermic needle. She was drugged. What's more, she'd been drugged for a good long time.

There was something faintly familiar about that face, something that—

I felt it then—the soft breeze that was barely distinguishable—like a whisper across the back of my neck, and I knew someone else was in the room with us.

He must have known I was there for he had opened the door without a sound and it was that draft playing against my nape that gave him away. He never spoke. He never said a word. He just let go with his gun.

I had straightened at the first hint of another presence in the room and that involuntary motion probably saved my life. His gun made a soft plopping sound like the clapping together of two cupped palms. And that was another thing that saved my life—his using a silencer. For a silenced automatic will fire only a single shot.

He couldn't miss at that distance, not altogether, but my movement made me catch the slug in the outside, fleshy part of my back instead of in my head.

I spilled with a heavy thump to the floor and lay there, not breathing, not moving, just waiting. The door was closed behind him. I could hear the harsh nervous sound of air cutting through his nostrils. Steps slithered across the thick-napped carpeting, coming toward me.

I was half on my side with my face turned up as his feet stopped just beyond my reach. I heard him remove the silencer from his weapon and that would give him a matter of several more shots.

Suddenly and without any warning a soft light from a reading lamp cast a rosy pool of light around the room. He had reached over toward the table and snapped it on.

I don't ever expect to see more surprise in a man's face. He had been certain I was dead. And why not? Hadn't he aimed a high-caliber bullet at my skull? Hadn't he heard the loose thump of my body against the floor? And yet now he was staring at my open eyes and at the ugly grin on my mouth with the teeth bared and locked tightly together.

Yes, that gave him quite a knock. But it did not surprise him as much as the derringer that I was holding in my hand and pointing squarely at his stomach, and his own eyes went wide and his mouth flapped open.

I said in a soft voice: "Almost, Dr. Ewing—almost but not quite."

And I didn't wait for him to bring his automatic into play. I pressed my finger against the trigger and the tiny pellet of lead ripped into his stomach. It was him or me—one guy with a gun against another—and I had to play the game his way.

I saw the bony structure of his long, narrow-jawed face twist into a grimace of pain. He dropped the gun and grabbed at his stomach, as if he could plug the bullet hole with his finger and stop the ebbing flow of his life from dribbling away.

He stood there for a second, swaying like a doll on a string, and then his tall gangling body collapsed, and I could see the sudden sheen of sweat glistening on his bald pointed skull.

NO, HE was not dead. And he might not die at all, though the chances in favor of his living long enough to climb the gallows were slender enough. He must have known that himself, known that bullet holes in the stomach cause too many complications. Hell, he was a doctor.

He was still alive and he could talk and he did.

"Where's the girl?" I asked. "Where's Emily Meredith?"

He sucked in some air. "In the garage."

"And her sister, Sue?"

He jerked his head toward the bed. "That's her. We dyed her hair yellow to fool anybody who—" He coughed twice and blood flecked the corner of his mouth.

And suddenly I saw it, saw the whole thing in sharp, crystal clear relief. And I said swiftly: "Mrs. Calvert passed away several days ago, didn't she?"

He nodded.

It was quite simple, really. According to the terms of his father's will, Doug Calvert had to be married a full year in order to inherit a couple of million dollars. And so when his wife died before that year was up, Dr. Ewing had suggested keeping the death a secret.

He had lured Sue Meredith into the house as a nurse, kept her drugged, unconscious. Later, after the year was up, he'd poison her, certify death from natural causes, and have her buried. The undertaker would be instructed to keep the coffin closed.

Little by little I pieced the story together, from the fragments he was able to gasp out. He'd been afraid that Emily might make trouble and so he'd hired Watley to get her out of the way until the thing blew over. Then, after my visit to the house that afternoon, he'd gone to the girl's apartment, found the fat man, and brought him to my hotel room. He killed him there. Maybe it was to frighten me off, or get me into trouble with the police, or maybe Watley had figured out the whole scheme and was asking for a bigger cut.

Later, after the cops came, we found Emily Meredith in the garage, trussed up and almost frightened out of her senses. The police doctor said that Sue would be well enough after a decent interval.

The scheme of course had been Ewing's, but Doug Calvert was an accomplice and just as guilty. I didn't think he'd get the big penalty though. A couple of million dollars can buy a lot of legal talent.

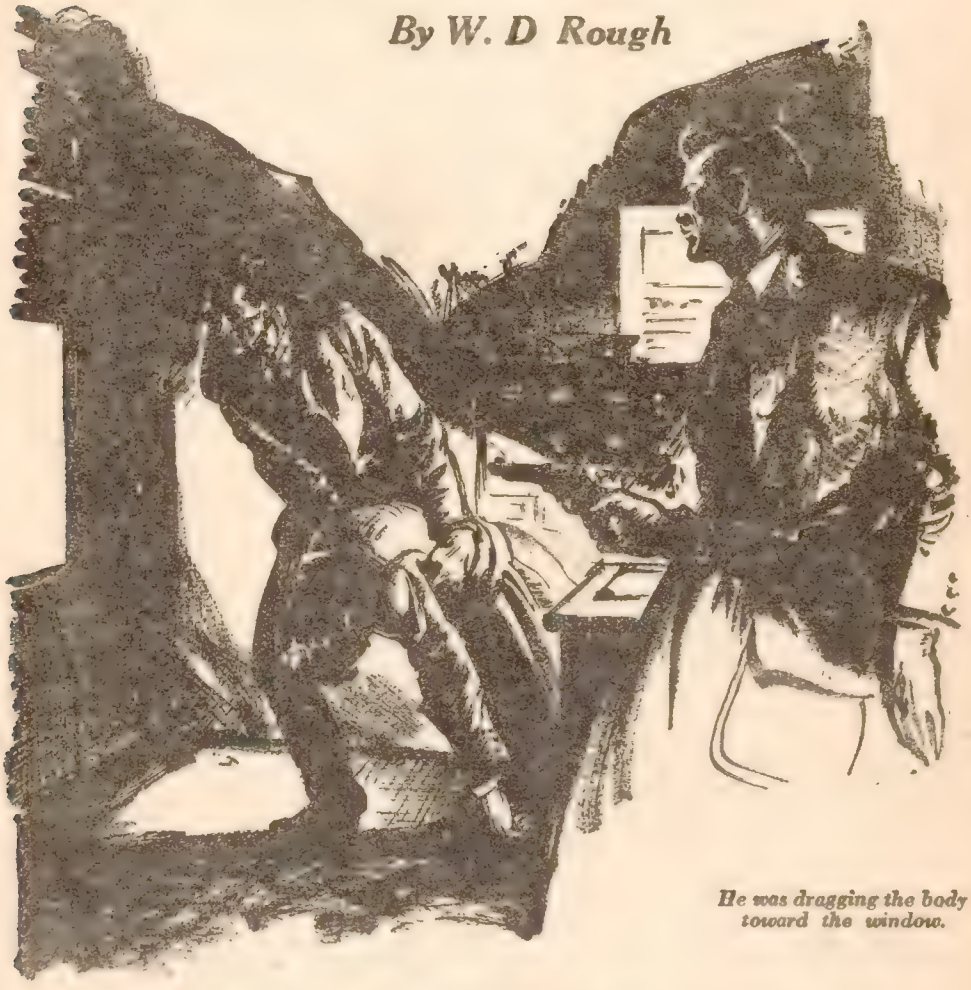
The cops searched the house and came back and told me that they had found Mrs. Calvert's body hidden in the cellar. They tell me I gave them the screaming willies with my wild laughter.

Don't you see it? I had been right that afternoon when I accused them of hiding a body in the cellar. That's what had almost stood them on their heads.

*DO YOUR SHARE . . . . BUY BONDS*

# The Corpse Has Wings

*By W. D Rough*



*He was dragging the body toward the window.*

*It was a real murder merry-go-round. Now you see the body, now you don't. And Chisel Breen, who had appointed himself guardian of the corpse, was going around in circles. For though he won the brass ring, it was only good for a free ride in the morgue wagon.*

I'D been waiting ten years for a break like this. Taking it meant lying, stealing, cheating—and the rest of the skulduggery in the book—but I'd expected table stakes when I took a hand in this game. So I threw all caution to the winds and I figuratively bet my whole poke on my ace-in-the-hole.

The next day, everybody in Moxenton asked the same question: "Who's this guy Chisel Breen?"

Nathan Charles appointed a manager for his mayoralty campaign and

told the papers the manager's name was Chisel Breen. That's all Charles told. And for a very good reason—it was all he knew!

There was rhyme and reason to his giving me the job, though. I had straddled the lush carpet in front of his luxurious desk in his office in the Terminal building that night after the Civic Rally and had given him no alternative. I said quietly, "If you don't listen to me, you're going to be convicted of murder."

Nathan Charles thought I was crazy. He said so. He said, "You're crazy! . . . Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm not crazy, and my name's Breen, and what I want is to see you get to be mayor of Moxenton and then help you run the city." I almost said, "Run the city for you," but caught myself.

"Now I *know* you're crazy! I—"

"I told you I'm *not* crazy," I poured at him. "I'll give you a diagram in a second. This leads up to it: when did you see Augie Fleg last?" Augie Fleg was the political boss whose place I meant to take.

"I haven't seen him at all," Nathan Charles snapped. "I refuse to have anything to do with a man like—"

"He was here tonight," I said significantly.

Charles' jaw thrust out. Big fists knotted. "Are you suggesting—"

I said softly, "Look at that ashtray."

In spite of himself, Nathan Charles' dark blue eyes focused on the ashtray on his desk, which was in the form of a Statue of Liberty set into a solid base of copper-plated metal. The statue part formed a nice handle for anyone who chose to use the ashtray as a bludgeon. Someone had. Nathan Charles' eyes were fascinated.

"What is it, Breen?" he swallowed.

"On the base of the ashtray? Guess." I let it sink in, then pounded it home. "Gore, Mr. Charles," I said. "Gore and hair. Black hair—pomaded black hair."

CHARLES' big chest was billowing in and out rapidly now. He was a politican's dream, a big, strapping handsome man with a dynamic personality that vibrated in every tone of his mellifluous speaking voice. His hair, cropped close and clean, was pure white. At the age of fifteen, he'd probably cursed that hair for getting him nicknamed "Whitey." But now, at forty-two, it was one of his prime assets. Put a man with white hair and blue eyes in a healthy, unlined face, on a soapbox, and half your political campaign is won. I know. I know politics inside out. It's my business.

Nathan Charles had more than the exterior trimmings. He had guts, and he was honest. Both of these qualities showed now; the honesty when he said, "I swear I don't know anything about this, Breen," the guts when he added, "But I'm going to find out, and may Heaven help the man who—"

"Wait," I said. "Let's understand each other."

"Precisely!"

And in that one word was all that was needed to drive home to me the fact that there was no backing out now. I had jumped in with both feet. If the slightest thing went haywire with this curve I intended to pitch, Nathan Charles would be the first to crack down. I can fight the other political hucksters in Moxenton by using their own methods against them. I can't fight an honest man. No one can.

"I'm not shaking you down," I said. "Now or later."

His blue eyes didn't relent. "You said you wanted to help me run the city," he accused.

"You'll get that part of it later. I—"

"I'll get it now, Breen," he crackled. "At once—and fast. Or—"

"Right. All right," I growled. "Turn your back to me and I'll give you an object lesson. . . Go on, I'm not going to slug you. You want to know what my motives are, don't you? Well, turn around, and I'll show you."

Nathan Charles was skeptical, but he turned. I had to make it good. In a way we were wasting time—coppers, I figured, would be pouring in any minute. But looking at it the other way, it was absolutely vital that I convince Charles of my intentions. I couldn't move an inch without him in my corner.

"Now," I said. "Listen. We've been looking at each other for several minutes. I've just told you—suggested damn plainly, anyway—that Augie Fleg is dead. I've intimated that he was killed with your ashtray, and I've shown you actual blood and hair on the thing. I've also told you that if you don't listen to me, you'll be convicted of murder. Now tell me honestly: has anyone ever made a greater impression on you?"

He didn't hesitate. "No one."

"Obviously," I agreed. "But tell me this: what do I look like? Describe me."

He hesitated this time. Plenty. I knew he would. Anyone would. That's why I have to work the way I do. I admitted it to him frankly.

"Get it?" I said, as he swiveled around again. "Here I barge in and slap you in the face with something that would wake the dead—and you can't even remember what I look like!"

Charles was nettled. "What about it?"

"This," I said, "and I'm taking down my hair to you, and if you laugh, so help me, I'll sock you. I've always wanted to be a politician," I hurried on. "Don't ask me to explain it—it's just a yen. Some men want to be doctors or lawyers or cops. Well, I want to be a politician. And I don't have a lousy chance. I've just shown you why. Nobody notices me. I'm inconspicuous. If a voter remembered me on election day, it would be a miracle. So I'll never get to hold a public office that requires campaigning.

"What's left? If I can't work in public, I'll have to work in private. Maybe the people will never know I'm a politician, but the politicians will. They'll find out what democracy means, if I get just one break. Money doesn't mean a damned thing to me."

NATHAN CHARLES was studying me. I watched him. If a ghost of amusement had flickered on his handsome face, I would have clopped him. I mean it. No man has the right to laugh at another man's dreams or breaks. I'd never been so frank about the itch in my soul before, and I'd picked Charles to work with because he was everything that I wanted to be—personable, outstanding, honest, a man. If he laughed . . .

I don't often feel uncomfortable—you don't feel uncomfortable when you know nobody watches you—but I got hot under the collar now. I wanted *this* man to understand. I sweated.

My answer—everything—came in five quiet words. "Glad to know you, Breen."

Nathan Charles and I shook hands.

"It will be a pleasure to undrape this frame," I said to Charles. "I've been hoping Augie Fleg would get tucked into eternity for a long time. He would have been my first pigeon, if you got to be mayor and worked with me. Somebody's saved me a lot of work, and if you weren't on the spot in this, I'd be inclined to yawn the whole thing off. A friend of mine, a private detective named Johnny Krantz, is sitting on Earle Shanding, your secretary, in the outer office. If you can't trust Shanding, we'll have to knock him out."

"Breen—you're amazing! You talk like an honest man, but you're certainly using gangster tactics."

"Forget it," I said. "Can you trust Shanding? If he'd been in politics before, I'd know about him. I've got facts at my fingertips about every politician of importance in the state and files on thousands that no one thinks are important. But all I know about him is that he was your law clerk."

"I was going to make him my partner before this U.S.O. drive that brought me into the public eye. I'm sure we can trust him."

"We'll chance it," I said. "We've got to make up for lost time now, so don't ask questions."

I moved then. I opened two doors. I opened the door to Nathan Charles' office and the door to his closet, behind the huge desk. I whistled at the office door for Johnny Krantz, said, "You don't have to pop him." At the closet door, I said, "Surprise!"

Charles had his mouth open again. He hesitated as Johnny Krantz's football shoulders and yellow head swung through the office door behind the thin, tight-lipped, well-dressed Erle Shanding. And he squeaked, literally, when Augie Fleg's hog-fat body was revealed in the closet.

"All clear, Johnny?" I asked, watching Erle Shanding who paled and made his tight lips even tighter.

"I gave Walt, the elevator boy, twenty bucks to let us use his cage," Johnny said. "We can get down the back stairs from the second floor. My car's in the back."

Nathan Charles was sputtering by this time, but it was nothing to the ovation Johnny Krantz gave me when I murmured, "We're not getting rid of friend Augie just yet, Johnny. We're taking him only as far as your office downstairs."

Instead of arguing with Johnny's, "Damn you, Chisel!" I picked up the Statue of Liberty ashtray and examined it and stuck it in my back pocket, the torch part down, ripping the cloth but holding.

"No identifying marks on it," I said to Nathan Charles. "Where did you get it?"

"S-souvenir—wife—New York...."

"Okay, suppose you sleep it off now. Johnny and I will take it from here. You," I said to Erle Shanding, "keep those lips at their normal tightness, and everything will work out. Augie was face down in that closet, so there are no blood stains."

It was too much to hope that Charles would relax, though. Erle Shanding, either. Charles used his lungs, but Shanding just made his murky eyes gyrate. I didn't like him.

"Okay, okay," I sighed, midway in the harangue. "Come down to Johnny's office in about ten minutes—if nobody stops you. It's on the second floor."

Johnny and I lugged the body.

WE ALMOST didn't make it. Henry Bates, the incumbent mayor, and Jacob Orville, the Independent candidate, made a procession of five hundred pounds of men squeezing through the elevator car opposite the one Johnny was using as a temporary hearse. When I saw the elevator indicator opposite flicker and stop at seven, which was the floor we were on, I lunged and sent Johnny and Augie Fleg's body careening into the cage, hurrying in after them. I swung the elevator door shut, holding my hand in the crack and peering through. As it worked out, it was damned lucky I didn't have the door open more than a crack. A slug would have stopped me from ever telling this story.

I figured cops, but still I wasn't surprised to see Mayor Bates and Orville. They were the boys who would gain the most out of Augie Fleg's being killed and Nathan Charles' taking the rap. If one of them hadn't promoted the kill, he'd certainly learned about it and collected the other as a witness. That was an inspiration. I cracked my fingers. Bet! Bates and Orville were coming to "discover" the crime.

You think I was only guessing? You don't realize how the anticipation of wrecking a decent man's career stuck out on the bloated faces of that pair. If I'd had qualms about what I intended to do before, I lost them then. They'd show no mercy; why should I? They'd probably engineered this frame; why shouldn't I re-engineer it?

That's the way I was figuring then.

I didn't reckon with Nathan Charles' ideas. I knew he was honest, but I didn't realize that he would make me toe a mark.

Mayor Bates and Orville didn't notice me, of course. They waddled, puffing and wheezing, down the corridor toward Charles' office. But that damned Erle Shanding reached his decision and spragged my wheel pronto. His thin, well-dressed wiry body slid into the corridor. He saw Mayor Bates and Orville. His murky eyes narrowed and a long arm shot out, pointing a bony finger.

"Augie Fleg is dead. Those men are stealing the body. We must stop them."

He said all that, but didn't make a move himself. He said the words to Jacob Orville, and he waited for Orville to do the acting. Orville did. I knew him for what he was—an ex beer baron of Prohibition days, a reformed gunman who still had the habit of carrying offensive equipment—and I saw his fat-ringed wrist flash to his shoulder holster. I could have beat him easily and test my hunch that even a .45 slug wouldn't go through so much fat; but I had other plans for Orville. I wanted him to die legitimately for killing Augie Fleg.

His first slug nicked the elevator door. He could still throw them where they were supposed to go. I banged the elevator door.

Johnny Krantz said, "You damned fool!" but he already had the cage dropping. "Now we *are* wedged, Chisel!"

"We'll put him in my 'office.' Without a *corpus delicti*, even Jake Orville can't prove murder."

"Cops will tear this building down if Bates and Orville believe the body's on the premises."

"We'll put him in my office," I repeated. "They can't find him for an hour, anyhow. We can do lots till then."

Johnny groaned. I bounced the cage to a stop, swung open the door, swept a glance down the second-floor corridor. It was empty. At eleven-thirty, it should have been.

"A hop, skip and jump now, Johnny," I said, taking Augie Fleg's feet again. "Is the door unlocked?"

"No," Johnny grunted.

"That's what you think," I said, getting the knob in my hand and feeling the door give.

"Well, I'd've sworn I locked it," Johnny muttered.

A voice said, "You did, chum. You did. Now just step in and no farther. . . . That's it. Now close the door. . . . Uh-huh, don't try it! Your eyes aren't used to the darkness in here yet. Why make me plug you when all I want is to slug you?"

That voice was familiar to me. I'd heard it played back from a dictaphone record that very night. But it was familiar for another reason, too. I'd felt it was familiar even on the dictaphone but couldn't place it. It was confident, cocky now. The other time, on the record it had been subdued, pleading—before it turned abruptly savage.

I heard a thudding sound, followed by a sigh and the swoosh of a body melting to the floor. That was Johnny. I was next. And the punk was right. He could see. Johnny and I had just come from the lighted corridor and couldn't. I crouched suddenly, did a deep knee bend and held both arms outstretched in front of me.

"Don't, Chisel," the voice advised. "You're not a bad little monkey. I don't wanna hurt you bad."

But he wanted to hurt me good. And he did. I followed Johnny Krantz.

I don't know when these thoughts registered, whether it was just before consciousness was lost in that roaring flash or whether it was when I fought that great weight off me coming to. But some time or other I thought: "This guy's going to swing his frame all over again. This time it will work. Orville will call cops here. And Johnny and I are in it deeper than Charles now. This is what I get for trying to fight fire with fire."

IT WAS a heavy, rasping voice I heard. "Give him another one. He's almost out of it." It was Madden—Chief Roscoe Q. Madden—talking. A tough copper. I was too groggy to recall whether he was tough because he was honest or because he was dishonest. All I knew was he was plenty tough, but would be compelled to take orders from Bates and Orville. I felt a rough palm smack my cheek, fought away from it, opened my eyes, looking for Augie Fleg's body.

It wasn't there.

There were plenty of other people, though. The fat men, Mayor Bates and Orville, the handsome man, Nathan Charles, the thin stick, Erle Shanding. And Walt Shucker, the fifty-year-old elevator "boy" whose lower, gray stubbled jaw was dangling as freely as the keys in his gnarled hands. Obviously he had been summoned by Chief Madden to unlock Johnny's office door.

Madden had half a dozen assorted plainclothes men and harness bulls with him, and one of these stopped slapping my cheeks when I wet my lips and managed, "Cut it, dope!"

Johnny Krantz was still out, and I saw and smelled that the reason was ether. Whoever had slugged us had intended to keep us out for quite awhile and had brought ether along to do the job. He'd given Johnny a dose, but apparently hadn't got around to me. The arrival of the cops, no doubt, had chased him. But where was Augie Fleg's body?

Madden was firing questions at me from around his cigar. I kept shaking my head and making believe I was too groggy to answer, and the more I thought about it, the better I felt. Sure, I was in the thick of it—but the body was gone! What could they do now? Why, I was in exactly the circumstances I'd anticipated if Johnny and I hadn't been slugged. I'd intended to hide Augie Fleg in my "office," and brazen out that I'd never heard of any damn fool body. My "office" is directly behind Johnny's, but unless you know where to look, you'll never find the door. It's part of the oak paneling.

"I've seen you in a hundred places in this town, chum," Madden said to me. "But I never paid no attention to you. I thought you were harmless. I guess you're not. So I'm going to make up for it now. I gonna give you *all* my attention. Catch?"

"You flatter me," I croaked.

"I flatter— Well, I'll be . . . So I flatter you, do I?" Madden lunged forward, fists knotting.

"Madden!" Nathan Charles' voice cracked. Madden caught himself. Nathan Charles wasn't mayor yet, but with Augie Fleg out of the way, he stood an excellent chance of becoming it—if he weren't convicted of murder.

Charles said, blue eyes puzzling at me, "I'm representing Breen."

I sighed in relief. He was stringing along for a minute, anyhow.

"I don't know what this is all about," I said. "I stepped into Johnny Krantz's office and got knocked out. What"—my stomach did a flip-flop; that damned Statue of Liberty ashtray was planked squarely on Johnny's desk, in full sight!—"what goes on?" I ended feebly.

Earle Shanding snarled, "What did you do with the body?"

"What body?"

Shanding whirled on Nathan Charles. Charles had guessed wrong about the man. Shanding was definitely against us now. "Nathan," he said, "you're not the type to cover up a thing like this. If you're frank, Mayor Bates will be lenient. We don't think *you* would kill—"

"Get the hell out of here!" I burst. Why not? No body, no nothing. "This is a private office," I lashed at them all. "Got a warrant, Madden? . . . Mr. Charles, as my attorney, have these men authority to break into this office and question me?"

"You little scum!" growled Jacob Orville. "We *saw*—"

"*You* saw?" I challenged.

"Well, I did," Shanding bit. "I saw

you and that blond man take the dead body of Augie Fleg—"

"You're a liar," I told him calmly. "The last time I saw Augie Fleg was before the rally. He was sore at Orville, said Orville was double-crossing him by spreading money in the fifth and eighth wards. He said he was going to find Orville and beat hell out of him."

"He's raving!" Orville blurted.

"I'm rhyming, brother," I said. "You and Augie Fleg were going to cross Mayor Bates, only *you* crossed Fleg, too. . . Mayor Bates," I pressed, "give me two minutes in private with you, and I'll show exactly how Orville was double-crossing—"

"Madden!" snapped Orville. "I de-man—"

Hizzoner the Mayor came to life. "*You* demand? Who are you to demand anything? You get me here on a wild suggestion—"

"You see, mayor?" I cut in eagerly. "*He* got you here. *He* is the one who suggests Fleg is dead. How could anyone know Fleg is dead unless he killed him or hired him killed?"

Erle Shanding saved Orville. He had to in order to save himself. "I discovered the body and called Mr. Orville."

I POUNDED it home. I wanted Mayor Bates down on the pair, and I wanted them the hell out of the office so I could go to work.

"Get it, mayor?" I said. "Shanding is the guy who claims Fleg was killed in Nathan Charles' office. Shanding is trying to frame Charles. Do you need a diagram? Shanding and Orville are working together. They figure with Charles out of the way, Orville can beat you in the election."

The collective blood pressure in that room would have run a blast furnace. But I had the whole card. No *corpus delicti*, no murder.

"On advice of counsel," I crackled, "I'm going to start throwing the lot of you out in three seconds."

"Shanding," snapped Jake Orville, "I want to talk to you."

"And I want to talk to you," Mayor Bates glared at me.

"If I could talk to Augie Fleg—" Chief Madden growled.

Walt, the elevator boy, grinned from ear to ear. It was a kick to see the big shots being squelched.

"I'll consult my attorney first, mayor," I said. "Give us a moment's privacy."

They went.

"Stick around, Walt, I have an errand for you," I said to the elevator boy, pushing him out and slamming and bolting the door.

"Where's · t h a t body, Breen?" Charles snapped.

"How much time elapsed after Johnny and I left your office till Walt let you in here?"

"Only minutes. But, Breen—"

"Should be here then," I said, going over to the back wall and opening the concealed door to my "office."

But it wasn't.

"It's been here, though," I scowled, noticing the way the furniture was disarranged, pushed aside so that the body could be dragged to the back door. "The guy who slugged us, stole the body and took it out the back. I wonder where he took it, and why . . . Listen to this, Mr. Charles," I said, snapping on a dictaphone. "This is what took place in your office tonight. Don't boil. I had to investigate you thoroughly before tieing up with you.

"This machine is rigged so that it records anything said in your office. You can hear what happened after you left for the Civic Rally tonight. Somebody took Augie Fleg into your office and pleaded with him for some kind of favor. Fleg turns him down cold. Listen now. The guy gets sore."

We listened—Charles frowning, I alert, trying to place the voice. We heard a gap of silence just after Augie Fleg said, "I won't do a damned thing. He can rot there for the rest of his life as far as I'm concerned."

There was a sharp intake of breath then, a curse from Augie Fleg, a scuffle, then a noise, soft, unrecognizable —except that we knew it was the Statue of Liberty bouncing on Augie's skull. Then the sound of the body falling, the closet door opening, a dragging sound, the closet closing.

I snapped off the dictaphone. "I heard that when I came back from the Civic Rally. I beat it up to your office, made sure Fleg was dead, then waited till you and Shanding came back. I had to be dramatic about it or you wouldn't have given me a free hand. This is all I want to know: do you recognize that voice?"

Charles' white head shook negatively.

"I was afraid not. Damn it, if I could place that voice! Obviously this punk wanted Augie Fleg to get someone out of jail. If I had just a clue, the full dope is in my files." I bit my lip. "Well, Johnny and I will just have to find that body and frame Orville as I intended in the first place."

*"What?"*

"Frame Orville," I rasped. "You heard me. Why do you think I hauled that body here in the first place? Why do you think I built up suspicion against Orville by lying that Augie Fleg was chasing him? I'm going to plant that body in Jake Orville's office or home and—"

"You're doing nothing of the kind!" The whip was in his voice.

DAMN Charles! He should have sprouted wings along his shoulder blades. Here were Orville and Shanding, acknowledged double-crossers, yet Charles couldn't hear of giving them their own medicine. And what a sweet frame I could have promoted on Jake Orville!

"Listen, it's perfect," I said. "Mayor Bates will string along in order to get Orville out of the election. I've got enough dope in my files to make the ward heelers in the fifth, eighth, fourteenth and twentieth say uncle. With Orville out of the way—"

"No, Breen."

That was all. But that "No, Breen," was a mouthful. It told me Nathan Charles was a man to tie to. His integrity never could be questioned. Here I was, offering him Moxenton on a silver platter and no soap.

Nathan Charles and I shook hands again.

"Come on, Johnny, to work!" I said, shaking Johnny Krantz back to the living. "You hold the fort, Mr. Charles," I said. "Krantz and I will go out the back way. If those crumbs in the corridor get impatient, tell 'em we're having a conference. We won't take long, because we can't afford to take long."

Johnny and I slipped out the back. "I'm through, Chisel," he said.

"Okay. I've a hunch that body didn't get far. Where's a likely place to hide it in this building?"

"Hell, any office. A mop closet, a— Hey, I said I'm through."

"Okay, the only way to move a body fast could be the elevator, the back one. Let's take a look. The punk who slugged us and stole the body must have had to slow up when the cops barged in here. That's why he didn't have time to slip me the ether."

"I don't want any part of it, Chisel."

"Okay, come on."

The service elevator was stopped on the ninth floor, according to the indicator. It was logical that the man who'd waltzed that body around would be in such a hurry that he couldn't be too precise about details. Johnny and I went up to the ninth floor, started using skeleton keys on the office doors.

Johnny took one side of the corridor, I took the other; and it was while I was prowling through a real estate office that I cursed myself and darted for the corridor. Hell, a doctor's office was the logical place. The punk had been there to get ether, hadn't he?

I should have collected Johnny. Instead I slammed into the first doctor's office I came to. I also should have slowed up when the door was unlocked.

I didn't, but neither did I make much noise. I stood in the doctor's reception room and listened. There was a grunt from an inner room. I peeked in, saw a small man, back toward me, fighting Augie Fleg's body toward a window.

"Hold it!" I barked.

I could've shot that guy a dozen times if he'd tried any other way but the one he did. As it was, he simply sat down on the floor, shot himself backward on his seat till he crashed into the desk which held the small lamp. The lamp went phfft!

"Johnny!" I yelped and waded forward, hands outstretched.

The man drove a chair into my shins and darted through the door. I piled after him, thinking Johnny would catch him head-on. Johnny didn't.

The man piled into another office, slammed the door. Johnny and I panted after him, used our skeleton keys. But as he went in the first door the guy'd gone through, we heard another door at the end of the suite close softly. It was like one of those dopey comedies in the movies. We went in one door, he went out another.

"Anyhow, we've got the body," I grimaced at Johnny. "And I really don't give a damn who killed Augie. It was a philanthropic gesture, so far as I'm concerned. Give me a hand, Johnny."

"Like hell I will!"

SO WE took Augie Fleg down to my office again. Nathan Charles was having kittens. It was his first dose of slime.

"Now w-what, Breen?" he stuttered when he saw Fleg.

I shrugged. "Well, if you veto the frame on Orville, what's left? Got to make it look like suicide. We'll get rid of the riot squad in the corridor then take Fleg back up to the ninth floor where we found him and push him out the window. We'll all scram and let some passer-by find him."

"No, Breen!"

You think a guy like that's a dope sometimes, but you've got to admire him. I knew I'd have to fight him tooth and nail for as long as we worked together in Moxenton, but at the same time I was glad he was what he was. I tried once more.

"Look, Mr. Charles, the same laws apply today in our cities that apply in the jungle. You think I'm using gangster tactics? Damn it, we're fighting gangsters, aren't we?"

"No, Breen!"

"You don't question my motives, do you? I want to see a decent government in this town for a change."

"The only way to get a decent government is to get it decently, Breen," Charles said flatly. "Look what gangster tactics have already done to the world. Violence breeds violence."

I rolled my eyes—but I loved it.

"Mr Breen. Oh, Mr. Breen." The voice was coming through the keyhole from the corridor. "You said you wanted me to do an errand."

"Just a second, Walt," I said. I went over to my filing cabinet, picked through the cards. "Here it is," I said to Charles and Johnny. "Augie Fleg sent this bird's son up on a phony murder rap. That's what the argument was about on the dictaphone. The old guy was trying to get Augie to make good on his promise to have the boy paroled. You heard what happened. Augie refused, and the old guy conked him."

"Who?" Charles demanded. "And why did he try to frame me?"

"He didn't, is my guess. He just parked the body in your closet till later. Just now, upstairs, he was going to push it out the window. That means he was faking a suicide, too. Here's my version of it."

I sat down at the typewriter and typed a confession.

Tonight, just before the Civic Rally, Augie Fleg came to the Terminal Building to see Nathan Charles. I knew Charles already had left, but I thought it would be a good time to talk to Fleg about getting my son pardoned. I took him up to Nathan Charles' office and pleaded with him. He turned me down cold, and in a fit of anger, I seized an ashtray from the desk and hit him over the head.

**I killed him. I couldn't get rid of the body with people in the building, so I hid it in Charles' closet, intending to push it out of a window later that night and make it look like suicide. I had no intention of hurting Nathan Charles, and now that the body has been discovered, I must confess.**

"We'll get him to sign this, give him some money, and let him scram," I said.

"No, Breen!" Nathan Charles scowled. "I know there wouldn't be an ounce of justice in sending that old man to the chair for exterminating the skunk who railroaded his son. But we started out to do this legitimately, and that's the way we'll finish it. If he signs the confession, I'll defend him—and I mean *defend!*"

AND that's the way it had to be. I called in old Walt Shucker, the elevator boy, and handed him the confession and a pen. He was a small gray man, almost as inconspicuous as I. I guess he'd gone through the world without being noticed either. He blubbered some when I promised Nathan Charles would defend him at the trial.

"I ain't sorry, Chisel," he said, tears in his rheumy eyes. "Augie Fleg promised my kid he'd get him out if the kid just kept mum. Then Augie laughed it off. I'd do it again—the rat!"

Johnny Krantz was gaping.

"That voice, coming through the keyhole," I said. "It was distorted just enough to sound like the dictaphone. Besides, who'd have keys to doctors' offices and would know the suite so well he could flit around in it in the dark? And who's the only guy small enough around. How long have you known about my 'office,' Walt?" I asked. I was nettled about *that.*

"I just stumbled on it one night, snoopin' around, Chisel," he said. "Don't worry, nobody else knows."

"What'd you have in mind by slugging Johnny and me and giving us ether?"

"I wanted to shove Augie out the window an' make it suicide," Walt said. "I thought maybe you and Johnny—I shoulda knowed better—was gonna shake Charles down. I didn't wanta make Charles no trouble, so when Johnny hires my cage, I hang around. I give you ether so's you won't come to till after Augie's body is found on the pavement. But then the cops horned in, so I dragged Augie to the service elevator and took him up to that doc's office and then come down the front way and opened your office door for the cops."

"That's it all right. Bates, Orville and Shanding were on the seventh floor when we got slugged. It had to be you."

"Jeez, I'm sorry about that, Chisel. I didn't want to make you no trouble. That's why I took that ashtray outa your pocket and put it on the desk when I heard the cops."

"Yeah? Well, you just put a nice set of fingerprints on it for me, Walt, and we'll call it square. Go wind up your personal affairs and check in at Charles' office in the morning. I'll get a kick out of keeping these cops guessing a while longer. And don't be afraid. Walt. We're in your corner."

So it worked out that way. Bates, Orville, Madden and Shanding were hugging the corridor outside. They didn't intend to let me out of their sight. They never figured a back way.

Johnny Krantz and I took Augie Fleg's body back to Nathan Charles' closet again. Those dumb cops weren't even guarding the office. I dropped the Statue of Liberty ashtray on Augie's fat gut.

Back in Johnny's office, I grinned and opened the corridor door. "Hey, Madden," I growled. "All this about Augie Fleg's body. Where is he supposed to have been killed?"

Madden glared. "You know damn well. In Charles' office."

I shrugged. "Did you *search* the office?"

"Why, no, I've been on this floor since—" Madden broke off, cursing, roared at his men, "Did anybody take the upstairs?"

"Tsk, tsk," I said. "Why, for all you know, somebody might have shoved the body in a closet, or something."

# Murder Begins at Home

*By Charles Larson*

*He was so eager to play the good host, he even invoked the aid of the Grim Reaper to make his guest more comfortable.*

MAX DAVIS leaned quietly forward and switched off his radio. For several seconds he remained hunched over, his plump freckled hand soft on the radio knob, his bald head cocked slightly to one side, listening.

In the silence the only sound was the hiss of the gas heater in the fireplace and the odd brush of rain across the windows.

Then, once more, he heard it. A knock. And another. Two more.

Eddie.

Because for a month Max hadn't sent him his money, his brother had come to ask for it.

Stiffly the fat little man got to his feet, his heart pounding as one hand brushed against the all-important liquor bottle on the table by his chair. At last the waiting was over. Finally he'd forced Eddie to come to him, and the first nervous step toward murder was safely past. Safely. . .

The knocking came again, louder now, wondering, a little angry. Max moved quickly across the small den and into a darkened hall. He made his way down the hall into the kitchen, snapping on lights as he went. At the back door he paused. *Get hold of yourself,* he thought. *He's here now, and he hasn't told anyone about the girl, and soon he'll be too dead to ever tell. Relax.*

Slowly he opened the door, walked down the short flight of steps to the basement landing. Through the dirt grimed window he could see Eddie's face, puzzled and white against the blackness.

He pulled at the knob. "Eddie!" he said, when the door was open.

The tall, thin man threw him a mock frown. "My God, Max," he said, "what were you doing? Counting your gold?"

"No. No. I was—my radio. I didn't hear . . ."

For a time they stood there, looking at each other. Then Eddie twisted his eyes upward. "Might rain if it clouds up," he murmured.

Flushing, Max stood back. "Sure. Come in. Come in." He motioned vaguely with one hand.

Eddie limped forward, pulling at his sodden hat, stretching his thin neck away from his wet coat collar. He waited while the other closed the door, and locked it, and then he started up the few stairs to the kitchen. Over his shoulder he said: "Surprised, Max?"

Max kept his eyes on his brother's heels. "Surprised?"

"This visit—I thought it might surprise you."

When Eddie turned his head, Max nodded toward the hallway and mumbled: "Go straight ahead. I fixed up a den out of that old fruit closet."

Quiet seconds passed while Eddie's sleepy eyes searched his brother's. Then, abruptly, he laughed. "O.K." He turned, hitched himself across the kitchen, down the hall, and into the square, compact room.

Inside, Max trotted busily about, seeing that the one window was shut tight against the rain, turning up the

gas, calling attention to the liquor bottle, emptying ashtrays, and all the time Eddie watched from the great brown leather chair he'd dropped into, not moving, not speaking, his paralyzed leg thrust stiffly before him.

When at last there was nothing more to do, Max walked to the gas heater, stood spread-legged in front of it, and faced his brother. He opened his mouth.

"Let's don't talk about what a wet night it is," Eddie said softly.

Thrown off guard, the fat man let his mouth hang open a moment longer. Then he said: "What?"

"Max—" Eddie bent sideways a bit, reached automatically for the bottle and poured himself a drink—"for heaven's sake don't be diplomatic. You've got something on your mind. All right. Get it off. Tell me why you didn't pay me last week, or the week before, or the week before that. I'm interested. I need money, bad. Already they've—"

"I'll never give you another cent."

OUTSIDE, the rain had stopped, but an erratic wind had risen.

Eddie hesitated just a second, then snapped his head back. Over the empty glass he looked silently at his brother.

Fiercely Max said: "I mean it. Blackmail's a dirty business. I'm tired of paying, paying, paying. . ."

He stopped. Eddie was laughing. Quietly, sincerely. Soon Eddie shook his head and rubbed at his eyes. "Good lord—"

Sighing, Eddie managed to stop laughing. "Listen," he said, "whose money is it I'm blackmailing from you?"

"Mine. Mine." The fat man's voice was rising. His hands were shaking, and it was hard to breathe.

"You know," Eddie said softly, "you're the kind of stuff actors are cut from. You can convince yourself of the damndest things, and then . . ." He shrugged. "When dad died, and gave you the control of the money because you were the business man, I think I knew you'd try something like this. It actually hurt you to give me enough to live on, didn't it?" He narrowed his young eyes. "And do you think, brother dear, that it's been fun for me to crawl to you every week for that miserable twenty dollars you call blackmail? Bills unpaid. Thirty cent dinners . . ." He looked down at his paralyzed leg. "If it hadn't been for this damn thing . . ."

Max cried: "It's blackmail. And nothing else. I know. I know. If you hadn't seen that girl, I'd stopped giving you money long ago."

Eddie opened his eyes wide. "Ah," he said, "we get somewhere. That's the poor devil you—ran over—wasn't it, Max?"

"That was an accident. You know it was." Trembling, Max stopped. He raised one hand in a curiously child-like movement and let it fall again to his side. "Oh, hell," he said, "drink your drink."

Eddie drank his drink. Laughing. . . .

As the evening went on, Eddie drank many drinks. Some he poured himself, some his brother urged on him. But he drank. More than he'd ever drunk before, more than he could handle.

Max was a good host.

It was at ten-thirty that it happened. Max had poured Eddie just one more, and Eddie didn't pick it up. The room was warm, and a sheen of sweat glistened on Eddie's forehead when he turned his eyes toward his brother.

The fat man leaned forward. "Eddie?" he murmured.

The eyes tried to wink, and only closed; the mouth tried to smile, but fell slack as a cut sawdust sack.

Still Max didn't move. A quivering had begun in his wrists and the back of his head ached. "Eddie," he said, "can you hear me?"

Slowly a tiny bubble grew at the lowest corner of Eddie's mouth. He didn't answer.

Max stood up. *Now,* his mind whispered. *Now do it. He's out. That's what you wanted. Go on. Go on.*

After his kneecaps had stopped trembling and the nausea in his stomach had gone, he made himself get behind Eddie's chair and push it as close as possible to the gas heater. Then he went quickly to the heater, shut it off.

Still leaning over the heater, he thought: *Twist. Let the gas out. One simple movement. Then it'll be over.*

And with one complete turn of his wrist, Max opened the valve.

Quickly then he backed to the door, opened it, got into the hall. He shut the door hard and stuffed two bath towels along the crack between the door and the floor. Then he walked without a backward glance into another room.

THE plan by now had reached its high point, its climax, and there was nothing left but details. Some were bothersome, like the trouble connected with shutting the gas off after fifteen minutes had gone by, and getting the body in and out of Max's car, and into Eddie's own flat. But on the whole they were only details, so that, half an hour later, when Max dragged Eddie into his own cheap bedroom, still mumbling to him as he would to a drunk in case anyone had seen them come in, he felt relieved and even let down somehow.

He let Eddie fall naturally to the floor and he bent down to Eddie's gas heater. When they found Eddie in the morning, they would find a drunk who'd turned on the gas and forgot to light it, and with the influence Max had, and such an obvious motive staring them in the face, only storybook police would look further.

Max sighed, and started to turn the square handle when someone knocked on Eddie's front door.

For the slightest second Max thought he might scream. But he didn't.

He walked to the bedroom door and caught himself just in time. While the knocking came again, louder, faster, he ran to the heater, twisted the valve, and walked back out of the bedroom, pulling at his tie, breathing deeply. *Calm does it,* he thought. *Keep 'em talking. Ten minutes should cover up.*

He opened the door and smiled at the fussy, middle-aged woman standing there. "Yes?"

"Well . . ." the woman simpered. "I'm Mrs. Clark."

"Oh?" Clark. The landlady. Of course. Checking on her tenants.

"Yes. I—" she stood on tiptoe and peered into the room over Max's shoulder— "I was wondering if Eddie had his money . . ."

Max frowned. "Money? I wouldn't know. What money?"

"His rent money. He hasn't paid his rent. He said he didn't have the money."

"Oh." Laughing, Max moved into the hall, closed the door behind him. "Yes. I remember. He said he'd pay you in the morning. I'm his brother. He—he's a bit under the weather."

Mrs. Clark looked sympathetic. "Ah," she murmured.

"Yes. It's his leg. It—it gets cold, you know. He drinks to forget the pain." Max nodded and tipped his hat. "Well, Mrs. Clark, good night."

Mrs. Clark followed him to the door. "Goodnight, sir. Your brother's a fine man. And when a man drinks for the aches in him, I'm one to look the other way. It's dangerous though, drinkin', especially when you got a gas heater. Maybe it's lucky he didn't get any money this last month."

Max smiled politely.

"Yes," Mrs. Clark said. "Anyway he won't get hurt tonight. Couldn't pay his bill, you know."

"Bill?" Max turned very slowly, his face pale, his mind suddenly numb.

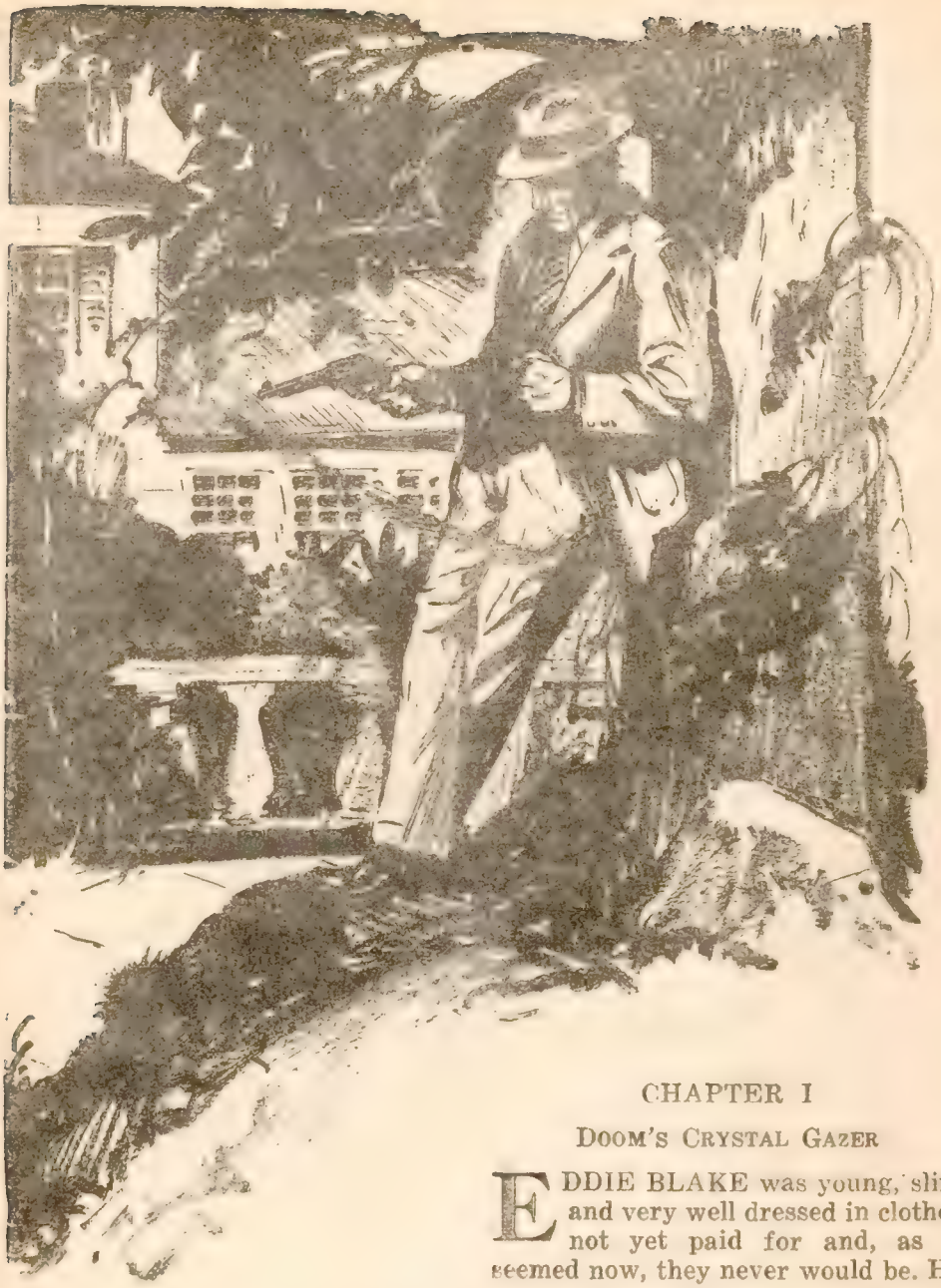
"Yes, sir. So don't you worry none. There ain't a bit of danger." She paused.

"They shut off his gas this morning," she said.

# Blood in the Crystal

*Sensational Mystery Novelet*

*By Norman A. Daniels*



*Satan's prophet was Chinu, the sinister crystal gazer who foretold Eddie Blake's vengeance mission. But though he read into the future the horrors of a nameless doom, Chinu did not know that he himself was only a crime mastermind's errand boy.*

## CHAPTER I

### Doom's Crystal Gazer

EDDIE BLAKE was young, slim and very well dressed in clothes not yet paid for and, as it seemed now, they never would be. He stood at the end of a long table and faced three men who regarded him with contemptuous smirks.

Eddie Blake said, irately, "Damn you—every one of you. I should have known that there was something wrong when pirates like you three raised me from a clerk to an officer of the firm."

Richard Newall, pompous and

double-chinned, puffed on a fat cigar and looked amused.

"Now, Eddie, you're taking this the wrong way. We believed in you and—you did well. Naturally, we gave you control of the Acme proposition because you were the man for it. How did we know it would be a bust?"

"Because you planned it that way," Eddie Blake stormed. "Now I'm taking the blame because things were arranged so that the Acme affair was entirely in my hands. You three are clean. I take the rap. I'm stuck with it, but so help me, why I don't strangle the three of you, wring your fat necks—"

Paul Carrington got up and waved both hands. "That's enough, Eddie. Get out of here. We were inclined to help you if possible. Now we won't lift a finger. Get out!"

"And that goes for me too," Ralph Martin broke in and wagged an admonishing finger. For him, that was a feat of remarkable energy.

Eddie Blake turned on his heel, walked out and slammed the door violently. A startled clerk in the outer office looked up.

"Oh, Mr. Blake, there's a gentleman waiting in your office. He says it's urgent."

Eddie Blake's shoulders drooped. The police—so soon. It hadn't taken the investors in the Acme affair long to find out the whole thing was crooked. He walked to his office, opened the door and blinked owlishly at his visitor.

The man proved to be very thin and of average height, and his face was quite dark. He wore a dark green turban and saluted Blake with an elaborate touching of his forehead.

"I am Chinu. You do not remember me, of course, because I am but a very small investor in your business, Mr. Blake. I come in a spirit of friendship and supplication."

"What's on your mind?" Blake asked with a sigh.

"It is about my investment. I gave your firm five hundred dollars. I need it and I wish to cash in my stock. The business of telling fortunes is not very good lately."

Blake sat down. "Look Mr.—ah—Chinu, if I had five hundred dollars of my own money, I'd give it to you. I haven't and I'm afraid you're out of luck. The Acme proposition is a bust. It never was any good although I fell for it just as you and a lot of others did."

Chinu looked worried. "You mean —"

"Exactly. You won't get a nickel back, but at that you're lucky. I'm going to prison."

Chinu clasped both hands across his scrawny chest. "I do not believe this, Mr. Blake. The lost money, yes. But you a thief—never. It is not in your future."

"Thanks," Blake said. "You're right about my not being a thief. The real crooks are these men who own this firm and made me a partner as a matter of convenience so I could take the blame."

Chinu arose slowly. "So . . . They are evil men. They should be punished."

Blake shrugged. "How? I could mash 'em to a pulp, but that would only get me an extra year or two in the cooler. No, I'm licked and so are you, along with too many other people."

"They *can be* punished," Chinu said, "if you so desire. Not by violence, but by evil luck. Ill fortune. I know the way. I am versed in such things. Believe me, I know the way."

Eddie Blake laughed. "I think you're crazy."

"But no. You see, they have caused me to lose my money too. I hate them almost as much as you, but I could not act against them because my hate is not strong enough. Mr. Blake, will you come to see me—tonight? You will not be sorry and those three men most certainly shall be."

Blake scowled. He hated Newall, Carrington and Martin enough. Maybe this Hindu was crazy and then

again, he'd heard these men could accomplish strange things.

"All right," he said quickly. "If I'm not picked up by the police, I'll be there."

"You will not be arrested," Chinu promised. "Not yet. Believe me, I know. At eight then."

BLAKE still figured Chinu as a crackpot, but at eight o'clock he turned resolutely into the apartment house where the Hindu lived. It was a modest place. His card was tacked below the bell. Blake punched the button, heard the door lock click and walked up three flights of stairs. Chinu was waiting outside his door.

With a sweeping gesture, he invited Blake to enter. Blake found himself in a fairly large room, hung with silken curtains thin enough to see through. The walls were covered with cabalistic signs. There was a table in the middle of the room with a velvet covered crystal on it. Blake sat down.

Chinu stepped closer and pulled over a small table. He looked down at Blake.

"I can read your mind, my friend. You doubt me very much, but you came in sheer desperation and because of the intense hatred you have for those men. Four of them, am I not correct?"

"Three," Blake amended. "The fourth member of the firm is Albert Fay. He has had no part in this and if he knew the truth, I think he'd wash his hands of the business."

"Ah—three then. Now, what I told you this afternoon was not a lie. I know how to make life very uncomfortable for these three men. Very uncomfortable. Are you ready to work with me?"

"If I could make those three squirm, I'd do about anything," Blake said. "Bring on your magic spell."

"It is no spell, but it is magic. A magic circlet—of human hair. Hair from the head of an Oriental witch. An evil person who destroyed all with whom she came into contact. She has been dead more than two hundred years, but her evil still lives. Wait, I will show you."

Chinu opened a drawer in the small table, extracted a pair of tightly fitting gloves and put them on. Then he drew out a jet black box, opened it and laid before Blake three squares of cardboard. Slots had been cut in them and through these slots were fitted several strands of the blackest hair Blake had ever seen.

"I don't get it," he said.

"It is so very simple, my friend. You will take these cards and the circlets of hair home. You will place them upon a table and sit before them, thinking of your hatred for these three men. Then you will seal these into envelopes, address them to the three men and that is all.

"Your hate will be concentrated in the magic circlets. The men to whom you mail them will not know this, but they will feel the results of your hatred. It may take a few hours, a few days, or even months. But be assured, they shall suffer. No one to whom these magic circlets have been given, has experienced anything but evil fortune. Some died—of purely natural causes. Others lost their money quickly. I have seen this spell work. It never fails."

"Is that all you've got for me?" Blake grimaced. "Three pieces of cardboard, three twists of hair? Well, I have nothing to lose. I'll take them. I'll mail them out too. Chinu, you say you can read the future. What happens to me?"

Chinu sighed. "You will be arrested. Nothing can stop that, but perhaps these three men will not be able to testify against you. Perhaps you can make a judge or jury believe your story, so long as the three men are not there to influence the law. Go now—mail these out at once and wait. You shall see that magic still has its powers."

Blake reached for the circlets of hair, but Chinu quickly seized them.

"No," he warned. "Not with your

bare hands, my friend. Even you and I cannot take chances. I shall wrap them, but when you handle these, wear gloves. Take no chances. Their power is enormous."

"Wait a minute," Blake hesitated. "You're not giving me something that will poison those guys. There's a lot of difference between spending a couple of years in prison or being there just a few weeks and then—*zingo!* Have them burn the life out of you."

"No poison—just magic. You must trust me. With the help of the magic circlets, these three men shall suffer. Wait . . you will see."

Blake took the wrapped package and went home. He half expected to find a detective waiting for him, but he was unmolested. He sat down at a desk and opened the package. He hesitated a moment and then went after a pair of gloves. Maybe Chinu was right. It cost nothing to be careful.

Still wearing the gloves, he addressed three envelopes to Newall, Carrington and Martin. Then he looked steadily at the three cardboard squares and the strands of hair arranged in a circle upon them. It wasn't hard to summon hatred for the three men. Blake was crammed full of it.

Finally he slid the cardboards into the envelopes, sealed them and carried them to the mailing slot in the hall. One by one he watched them vanish and hoped they would bring bad luck to the men they were addressed to. Then Blake went to bed.

## CHAPTER II

### Talisman of Vengeance

THE next day, Blake waited for the arrival of an officer with a warrant, but still the auditors and the bonding company seemed to be holding off. He sent for the late afternoon papers to see if they carried a story about the crack-up of the Acme Company.

Blake was thumbing his way to the financial page when he stiffened. There was a boxed item on the front page.

FINANCIER AFFLICTED BY STRANGE ILLNESS

Hugh Newall, noted investment dealer, was stricken early this afternoon with a strange malady. Doctors have been unable to diagnose his condition, although they state he is in grave danger and has been placed on the critical list. The victim is unable to assist his doctors because he cannot talk nor move his limbs. He has been associated with the firm of Newall, Carrington, Martin and Fay for more than sixteen years and is well known in financial and charitable circles . . .

Blake's fingers grew numb and the paper slipped from his hands. He found his throat strangely dry. He walked like a robot into the next room and drank a glass of water from a decanter. Then he moved over to the phone and mechanically dialed Carrington's number. He heard the phone buzz, but there was no answer.

Blake was galvanized into action by fear. He seized his hat and coat, raced to the street and hailed a cab. He gave Carrington's address, stuck a cigarette between his lips and forgot to light it. The cab seemed to take hours to make the short trip to Carrington's home.

Blake got out there, was called back by the cab driver whom he'd forgotten to pay. He handed over a bill and walked slowly up the path to Carrington's porch. It was a big house and rather secluded by clever landscaping.

Blake hesitated. Perhaps Newall's strange illness was just a coincidence. Carrington might be at the hospital or at the office. But there were lights burning on the first floor. Servants, perhaps. Blake gulped and decided to take a look before he announced himself.

He went around to the side of the house, found a window with the curtain up and stood on tiptoe to peer inside. What he saw made Blake's heart skip every other beat for a moment or two.

Carrington lay on a davenport. A doctor was bending over him and

Blake had never seen such intense agony written on a man's face. Carrington was alive, but it was also clear that he had little time left. His flesh was cyanotic, his hands gripped into mighty fists. Every muscle stood out like whipcord.

There was a bulky man standing nearby. The doctor motioned to him and the bulky man moved closer. He bent over Carrington and Blake had a glimpse of a badge pinned to the vest. A detective! They'd already decided that the illnesses of Newall and Carrington was the work of a killer then.

Blake didn't want to see any more. He found that he no longer had the slightest hatred for these men who had framed him and made nearly a million dollars by fraud for which he'd have to take the consequences.

Blake turned and started to run away. His mind was too occupied by horror to notice the wire that enclosed a bed of freshly planted flowers. His ankle caught on it and he fell heavily.

It took him a few seconds to regain his wits and he heard a window raised noisily. Blake looked back. The detective was peering out and undoubtedly had seen him. The detective vanished. Blake got up, found his ankle sore, but started to limp away.

SOMEONE called out an order to halt. Blake kept on going. If he could reach the security of the thickly arbored rear yard, he'd have a chance. A gun exploded and lead whistled just left of his head. Another slug came even closer and Blake stopped short. He elevated both hands.

"Don't shoot. I give up and I'm not armed."

The detective came forward cautiously, gun held at a ready angle. He shoved the muzzle of it into Blake's stomach, rapidly searched him and then lowered the gun a bit.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What were you doing around this estate?"

"My name is Blake. Eddie Blake."

"Blake." The gun came up again. "Don't move. Not one muscle except to stick out your hands. This is an arrest."

Blake shrugged when the cuffs closed around his wrists. "I've been expecting it. How come it took so long to swear out a warrant?"

"What warrant?" the detective asked. "We don't need warrants to make a pinch for murder."

"Murder! Mur-murder?"

"Don't act so innocent, Blake. I'm Sergeant Wilson of the homicide bureau. I was investigating the death of Hugh Newall when I learned Carrington had been taken with the same kind of illness. Only it's not illness, but poisoning. What kind of drug did you use?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Blake answered. "I—I expected to be arrested for violating certain financial acts. Not murder!"

Wilson grabbed him by the arm and piloted him back to Carrington's house. Blake was pushed up close to the davenport on which Carrington lay. The stricken man's eyes were open and when Blake came within their range, they almost seemed to give off sparks of rage. Carrington moved a bit. His set jaws relaxed; his lips moved and very faintly he spoke.

"Blake . . . did it. Threatened to . . . kill us all. Blake . . . poison . . . sent hair. Recognized . . . handwriting . . ."

Carrington had mustered all his waning strength to make that accusation and by some miracle the frozen muscles relaxed themselves a bit. But it was over now. Another spasm of horrible rigidity came over him and in three or four minutes he was dead.

Sergeant Wilson nudged Blake and pushed him over to a desk in a far corner of the room. He pointed at the envelope which Blake had addressed and mailed. Beside it was the card containing the circlet of hair.

"How'd you do it, son?" Wilson asked.

"But I didn't . . . or maybe I did. Sergeant, I sent out three of these. Carrington is dead. Newall was dying . . ."

"He's dead too. Who else got one of these?"

"Ralph Martin," Blake groaned. "For heaven's sake, find him. Warn him not to open his letter. Tell him not to touch it."

Wilson seized the phone and Blake provided Martin's number from memory. Someone answered and Wilson did more listening than talking. He hung up finally and faced Blake.

"You were a little late. Martin is in bed, plenty sick, but they think he may come out of it. Now if you feel in the mood to make a confession, this is as good a time and place as any."

"I sent out those cards and the circles of hair," Blake said slowly. "I didn't know they'd kill anyone. Chinu said they'd just bring bad luck and I hated those men enough to wish them all kinds of evil fortune."

"Who," Wilson asked, "is this guy Chinu?"

"A Hindu. Some kind of a fortune teller. He lost money in an enterprise fostered by the three men. It was crooked and they arranged it so I'd have to take the blame."

Wilson frowned. "That sounds like the worst alibi I ever heard in my life. It's so rotten maybe there's some truth behind it. We'll go see this Hindu."

A servant tiptoed out of the room to answer the door bell and admitted a man of about fifty. He was white-haired and theatrically handsome. He saw Carrington dead and gasped in horror. He saw Eddie Blake, the handcuffs on his wrists, and hurried over to him.

"Hello, Mr. Fay," Blake said disconsolately.

"Eddie, what in the world has happened? I heard of Newall's death, heard that Carrington was very ill so I came over here."

"There isn't much you can do," Blake said. "Newall, Carrington and Martin organized a branch firm while you were away. It dealt in that Acme stock and—went bust. They made me head of the firm and I guess the blame will be placed on me. Now they say I poisoned them. Martin is sick too."

FAY chewed on his lower lip a moment. "Eddie," he said slowly, "I've always had a great deal of faith in you. I know how they arranged things too. Found it out right after I got home today. It was a dirty trick. If you took revenge on them, I can hardly blame you and I'll stand behind you. Bail—attorneys."

"There's no bail for murder, Mister," Wilson said. "If you're all through, we'll get going. Maybe you'd better see me at headquarters in about an hour, eh? Sergeant Wilson, homicide bureau."

Wilson piloted Blake out of the house and into a police car. He drove it to the address where Chinu lived, but he didn't get out right away. He seemed to be studying Blake intently.

"You know, son," he said, "I've dealt with killers for many years. Lots of 'em don't look like they'd hurt a fly—just as you look now, but somehow I think you're different. Suppose I take the cuffs off you. Would I be taking any risk?" He paused. "You know, of course, you could never really get away. And any attempt to do so would practically convict you—even if you turn out to be innocent.

"I won't run away," Blake said. "I want this cleared up as much as you do. Perhaps I am indirectly responsible for the deaths of those men, but it wasn't willful. I didn't want them to die."

Wilson removed the handcuffs, got out, and Blake walked with him to the entrance of the building. Wilson rang the bell and the door lock clicked. Chinu was waiting at the top of the

stairs. His swarthy face was a trifle paler than usual and his hands shook a bit.

Inside his apartment, Wilson got down to business. Chinu listened quietly until he was through. Then he opened the drawer in that little desk and took out more of the circlets of human hair.

"I cannot understand it," he said. "These talismen are authentic, officer. They can bring bad luck, but not death. Not so quickly anyway. Yes, I gave them to this young man because I hated his employers as much as he did."

"I notice you handle those strands of hair with gloves on," Wilson said. "That doesn't indicate you trust them either."

Chinu grunted, peeled off his gloves and picked up several of the strands of hair. He let them run through his fingers slowly.

"You see? I am not afraid. They are quite harmless until they are instilled with someone's hatred."

"But you wouldn't handle those you gave to me," Blake said quickly. "You were afraid of them."

Chinu smiled. "I was afraid then, because your hatred might have entered the magic strands. Of course, I do not expect a hard-headed detective to believe me, but there are things no one in the world can understand. The strands of hair from the witch are of that type."

Wilson picked up one of the strands of hair and held it between his fingers. He studied it closely and then handed it to Blake.

"Is that the same color and texture as the stuff he gave you?"

Blake took the circlet of hair gingerly. "Yes, the color is the same. I never felt of the other strands. I was afraid of them, but this seems to be harmless."

Wilson tucked the strands into an envelope. He faced Chinu. "All right, put on your coat and let's go downtown. Until the doctors find out what killed those two men and made the third one ill, I'll have to hold you both. We'll run this hair through a test, too."

## CHAPTER III

### Murder Behind Bars

CHINU was locked up, but Wilson permitted Blake to remain in his office. Fay was there, worried and distraught.

"I'm sorry about all this, Eddie," he said. "If I'd stayed home and attended to business, it would never have happened. I talked to Martin a few minutes ago. He swears you did this out of revenge and it begins to look as though the accusation will stick."

"Me—I'm not so sure." Sergeant Wilson looked up from the desk where he was sitting. "Things are too pat. By the way, Mr. Fay, with Carrington and Newall dead, you and Martin will take over the entire business. That's true, isn't it?"

Fay nodded. "Yes, it was a partnership. Martin and I inherit. I—sergeant, are you trying to establish a motive?"

"Uh-huh. You can't blame me. The way this boy was rigged to take the rap was pretty cleverly done. As if somebody hoped he'd get plenty sore and be ready to do just about anything for revenge. The Hindu showed up at exactly the right moment and talked Blake into the scheme. I—damn, my fingers itch like they had the hives."

He looked down at his fingers and found the tips of them red. Wilson turned pale, jumped up and rushed over to where Blake sat. He grabbed his hands and studied the finger-tips. There were red flecks on the tips of Blake's fingers, too.

"Carrington's and Newall's fingers looked the same way," Wilson gulped. "Blake—you and I . . . the strands of hair. We handled them. Stay here. I'm going to drag that Hindu out and make him talk."

After Wilson had gone, Blake studied his fingertips and groaned. It looked as though he and Wilson had doomed themselves when they touched those strands of so-called magic hairs. He flexed his muscles to see if they felt stiff. Sweat broke out in fine beads all over his forehead. He looked up at Fay with harrowed eyes.

"Do you think—"

"You need a doctor and quickly," Fay said. "Let's go find one. Never mind the fact that you're arrested. Come on—there's a side door just down the hall. We'll call Sergeant Wilson back and tell him as soon as you've seen the doctor."

Blake could think of nothing except the utter menace in those tiny red marks on his fingertips. He forgot what running out would seem like to Wilson. He followed Fay out of headquarters and they rushed down the street to the nearest doctor. Blake hoped that Wilson wouldn't get too sore.

But Wilson was having some troubles of his own. He advanced on the cell in which the Hindu was locked and, like Blake, found himself covered with sweat. He'd seen Carrington die and it hadn't been very pleasant.

Chinu seemed to be lying down. Wilson rattled the door.

"Hey—you! Get up! I've got a few questions—"

Wilson narrowed his eyes and peered through the semi-gloom of the cell. Then he yelled stridently for the turnkey. The door was opened. Wilson stepped inside and bent over the Hindu. For a moment he closed both eyes and groaned. Chinu was in the same condition as that in which Carrington had died. Muscles were rigid, eyes bulging and jaws affixed. He was still alive, but Wilson knew the signs.

He rushed back to his office, found Fay and Blake gone and swore softly. He called for doctors and then sat down to steady his own nerves. His fingertips were getting redder by the minute and felt as though a million tiny needles were being driven into them. Wilson shuddered and then forced himself to get down to business. He sent out an alarm for both Fay and Blake.

Blake, meanwhile, let a doctor examine his fingers. A sample of his blood was taken and studied under a miscroscope. The doctor shook his head.

"So far as I can see, there is nothing, young man. The redness on your fingertips is caused by some corrosive substance, but there are no symptoms or traces of poisons. The only thing to do is wait."

"Wait," Blake groaned. "Meanwhile, Wilson may die. Mr. Fay, I don't know how you'll feel about this, but I'm not going to phone Wilson. I'm going to try to find why, how and by whom these murders have been committed. You'd better not come along. Wilson won't like this and I don't want you to get into any trouble."

Fay shrugged. "As you wish, Eddie. Good luck, anyway. This is a ghastly finish to our association, but—I can tell you this if it is of any comfort. The firm was going to break up anyhow. The papers were all drawn and delivered to each member."

BLAKE left the doctor's office and got into a cab. He hesitated, trying to figure out just where he'd begin. Martin seemed the best bet. In fact, the only one because he alone had survived. Blake gave his address and settled back.

The radio was playing very softly and the program signed off just before the cab pulled up in front of Martin's home. The next program was a newscast and it concerned the mysterious murders.

A Hindu fortune teller, arrested and lodged in a cell at police headquarters, is dying. . . The third victim of this killer. A suspect, Edward Blake, escaped from the office of Sergeant Wilson and is now being sought.

The announcer went on to give a perfect description of Blake, who has-

tily pulled down the brim of his hat. Keeping his face averted, he paid off the taxi driver and walked up to Martin's porch.

He was admitted by a servant who looked extremely doubtful when he learned Blake's name. It was apparent he'd heard the broadcast, but Blake had to take a chance. He hurried upstairs to Martin's bedroom.

The fat financier was propped up in bed. He was alone in the room, and when he saw Blake, his face turned purple.

"You—you killer!" he screamed. "You won't get away with this, Blake. The police have the envelope and that damned strand of hair it contained. I almost died. Carrington and Newall are dead, and, believe me, you're going to be dead, too. In the electric chair."

"Wait a minute," Blake begged. He ran his fingers through his hair and felt the tips of them burn again. He stepped up to the bed and peered closely at Martin's fingers. They were unmarked.

"I didn't kill anybody," he said slowly. "I never wanted to, even though you and the others did double-cross me. I'm not a murderer, Martin, but I've got to prove it and you're going to help me."

"I wouldn't help—"

"You will. Listen to me—if I didn't commit those murders, then someone else did. Someone who stands to profit by your death and those of the others. Albert Fay just came back to town, so he says. He told me the partnership was about to be disbanded. There's a lot of money on hand—nearly a million dollars. Enough to murder for. Do you think Fay could have done this—to get his hands on the accounts?"

Martin's fat jowls quivered, but his blazing eyes seemed to become a bit cooler. He dry-washed his hands and licked his lips.

"I never thought of that. Perhaps you're right. Fay hasn't been active in the business lately. Got too righteous, I guess. I understand he needs money, too. Blake, if you didn't do this and Fay did, I'll give you ten thousand dollars to prove the case against him. I'll arrange it so you're not blamed for what happened at the office. Carrington and Newall are dead. They can take the blame for the Acme affair. It won't hurt dead men."

Blake grimaced. "Your ethics are about as rotten as ever, Martin, but this is no time to haggle. We'll iron out the details later. I—"

A siren howled in the distance. Blake rushed to the door and found a pop-eyed servant standing in the hallway with a gun in his hand. A gun he was too frightened to use.

Blake slammed the door, twisted the key and sprinted toward a window. He opened it wide and looked out. There was a nasty drop to the ground, but not half as dangerous as falling into police hands at this moment. He climbed out, hung by his hands for a second and then let go.

He hit the ground with a thump that shook the breath out of him, but the sound of heavy footsteps on the porch and more on the sidewalks leading to the back of the house, gave him back his strength. He arose and fled into the night.

On the street, he paused a moment and wondered which way to turn. He was a marked man now. The illness and almost certain death of Chinu robbed him of the final hope to establish his innocence. He was entirely on his own and the ground was fraught with danger.

Fay, he realized now, had been almost too eager to have him run out on Wilson. But suspicions without facts to back them up were worthless. He had to go at this thing as a detective would handle it. Blake began walking rapidly in the direction of Carrington's home.

Only a few rooms on the first floor were illuminated and police cars had disappeared from the street. Blake approached the house from the rear and moved toward a window of the room in which Carrington had died.

He recalled that Wilson had opened that window. Perhaps it hadn't been locked again. His hopes were fulfilled, for the window was partly open and he raised it quietly.

The body was gone, but otherwise nothing seemed to have been touched. Blake climbed into the room cautiously, listened for a moment and heard faint footsteps upstairs. That would be the servants.

He walked over to Carrington's big desk, sat down, and began to explore the contents of the drawers. In the top middle one, he found a metal cylinder with a typed address slip and cancelled postage stamps pasted on it. He unscrewed the cap on one end, dumped the tube upside down and a tightly rolled piece of parchment paper slid out. It opened partially, so that he could read some of the inscription on it. He reached for it and then hesitated. There had been a very faint scraping sound near the window which he'd left open.

Blake twisted his head and was galvanized into action. A gun protruded between the curtains, and it was held in a gloved hand. The gun exploded. Blake heard the bullet slap into the back of the chair he'd occupied a split second before. He was sheltered by the desk, but that didn't do much good because he was unarmed.

Then the lights went out. Apparently the killer had slit the wires outside the house. Blake heard the murderer climb through the window, and while he was so engaged, Blake quickly tiptoed to a wall and flattened himself against it.

He made out the shadowy form of the killer as he cautiously advanced toward the desk. Blake took a long breath and lunged forward. His foot scraped against the floor and the killer was warned. He swerved. Blake hit him hard, but the gun lashed down, collided with the side of his head and Blake went reeling off a few steps before he dropped. Things were spinning madly and he was barely aware of hurried footsteps across the floor.

Finally he managed to get up. The door to this room opened and yellow light came through it. He was revealed to the pair of servants who stood there. Both of them took one look and fled. Blake decided he'd better get away, too.

He hurried over to the desk. The metal cylinder and the parchment were both gone!

## CHAPTER IV

### Murder by Remote Control

THERE were a few minutes left before the police would respond to the alarm flashed by the servants. Blake raised the phone and called Fay's home. He held his breath for fear the man might not be there, but Fay was.

"Eddie," Fay cried, "this has turned out rather badly. The police are looking for you. Me, too."

"Never mind that," Blake said. "Did you receive a metal cylinder in the mail? It contains a piece of parchment."

"I don't know what it contains," Fay answered. "It's right here on my desk. I was about to open it. Didn't get back to town until a few hours ago, and I've been too busy since to take care of my mail. What's wrong, Eddie?"

"Don't touch that cylinder. Don't open it under any circumstances. I'll be right over."

Blake hung up and departed by the window. Fay's home was a good distance away and Blake had to be very careful. Every cop in town was looking for him. He kept to back streets and frequently dived into alleys or yards at the approach of anyone.

Finally he reached the house and made sure no police cars were in the vicinity. He hurried onto the porch and rang the bell. A couple of minutes went by and there was no answer.

Blake felt a wave of horror assail him. He rushed to a large window,

tried to look inside, but everything was dark. He stepped back, raised one foot and kicked the window in.

Reaching through the gaping hole, he turned the latch, raised the window and clambered through it.

"Fay," he called out. "Fay!"

Nobody answered. Blake began turning on lights. Fay wasn't on the first floor. In a study on the second, Blake found him. Fay lay on the rug, blood matting his temples. He groaned as Blake entered.

Blake raised him, dragged him over to a chair and propped him against it. Fay opened his eyes and there was fear in them until his senses recognized Blake.

"I—don't know what happened," he said weakly. "I was sitting at my desk staring at the metal cylinder—"

"The cylinder," Blake cried and jumped up. There was no cylinder on the desk. He returned to Fay's side and the man continued to explain.

"I was trying to figure out what in the world you meant—and then something hit me on the head."

"It was that book end taken from the top of the bookcase just inside the door of this room." Blake pointed to the blood-smeared weapon.

Suspicion entered his mind. Fay might have inflicted that wound himself. Knocked himself out as an alibi to account for the missing cylinder. This had happened almost too conveniently. But, Blake reasoned, Fay had answered the phone promptly and therefore couldn't have been the man who attacked Blake at Carrington's house.

"What's in the cylinder?" Fay asked.

"A rolled up document. I saw one on Carrington's desk, but somebody took that away. It was an elaborate paper dissolving the partnership of the firm. Did you know it had been printed?"

"No. I haven't had anything to do with the business for weeks."

"What about nearly a million dollars on hand to be shared by the partners?" Blake asked.

"There should be some money. I don't know how much. Good heavens, Eddie, are you thinking that I—"

"I haven't time to think," Blake said. "You stay here. I've got things to do and time is against me. The killer has too much of a start."

Blake rushed toward the door, hesitated and turned. He'd forgotten Newall's address.

"Where did Newall live, Mr. Fay?"

Fay told him and Blake rushed out of the house. He risked everything now because he had to beat the killer to Newall's home. A taxi driver, bribed by Blake's last five-dollar bill, practically broke all records in crossing town.

BLAKE eyed Newall's house, a fairly large place in the suburbs. It was entirely darkened. Blake decided to use caution now. The killer might be lying in wait. If he was Fay, of course the coast must be clear and Blake wasn't at all sure but that the fourth member of the firm was implicated.

Blake tackled a rear door, but had to give up. It was too stoutly locked. He didn't dare smash a window because there were neighbors fairly close by, so he studied the cellar door and found it to be equipped with a rather flimsy lock.

The door, too, was thin. Blake hurried to a garage at the rear of the house, found a car and tools there. He returned with sufficient equipment to cut through the panels of the door and reached the bolts inside.

He climbed the cellar steps, aided by the light from a match. The door at the top of the steps was closed and Blake paused a moment to listen intently. He heard nothing, opened the door and stepped into a hallway.

Instantly things happened. Someone growled an oath. Feet rushed toward him and Blake backed up hastily. He saw the dark figure lunge toward him and he met the attack. But Blake

was small and rather thin. The killer was a huge man and his weight counted in a mad rush like this.

Blake was hurled against the wall. A powerful hand closed around his windpipe. Blake lashed out with both fists, burying them in a paunch of a stomach and eliciting wheezes of agony. He kept this up although his strength began waning as air was cut off from his lungs.

Suddenly the grip around his throat was released. The killer couldn't take any more of Blake's desperate fists. Blake was dizzy, but that passed off quickly enough and he looked around for the man. He'd disappeared completely.

Blake heard the front door close. He raced toward it, grabbed the knob and started to open the door. This was fatal, for in his haste, Blake didn't notice the small closet in the hallway. He didn't see the door open and the gross figure of the killer emerge with clubbed gun held high.

It descended and found a perfect target. Blake dropped and lay very still. His nerves and muscles were numbed, but somehow his brain still functioned. He could still see and hear, but he was unable to offer the slightest resistance.

The man grabbed his feet and dragged him down the hallway and into a room. He closed the door and then kicked Blake experimentally in the ribs. Blake suppressed the urge to cry out in pain.

Blake's assailant then stuffed his gun into a pocket, reached under his coat and drew out a thin knife. He bent over Blake. The knife started down and paused. Blake was trying to summon back his strength. This looked very much like the finish to it all. That knife would slice into his throat in a matter of split seconds now.

But the murderer, still shrouded by darkness, had other ideas. He lifted Blake's left hand. The knife sliced across the wrist and blood spurted. Blake groaned involuntarily at the hot bite of the blade. The killer worked faster then.

He returned the knife to its scabbard beneath his coat, drew out a small flat box and opened it. From this he took a slim glass tube, removed the cork and lifted out a piece of cotton.

Bending over Blake again, he briskly rubbed the moist cotton against the wound on his wrist. This done, he straightened up, grunted in satisfaction and replaced his equipment. He walked over to a desk, removed one of those metal cylinders from it and before Blake could arise, he was gone.

Blake got to his feet. He staggered out of the room, holding onto his bleeding wrist. Blood spurted from it in a small geyser. His lips were drawn in a grimace of pain. He made no attempt to pursue his attacker. There were more important things now—like saving his own life.

He half reeled up the steps to the second floor, located a bathroom and turned on the cold water. He shoved his bleeding wrist under the stream, and with the other hand, opened a medicine cabinet to find a powerful antiseptic.

He filled the sink with water, poured in some of the solution and kept his wrist buried in the biting stuff for many minutes. The bleeding let up a bit, but to be on the safe side, Blake after much difficulty fashioned a neat tourniquet and twisted it fairly tight.

With a more concentrated solution of antiseptic soaking a wad of gauze, he applied this to the wound and bandaged it clumsily. This done, he started to move his jaws rapidly, and felt no stiffening of them.

He hurried down the steps and when he reached the landing, he stopped dead. The lights suddenly flashed on and a familiar voice spoke.

"Don't move. I've a gun in my hand and I wouldn't mind shooting."

"Sergeant Wilson," Blake said turning around slowly. "Sergeant, you've

got to give me a break. It's the only way we'll find the murderer."

"Yeah?" Wilson sounded sarcastic. "I think I've found him. Listen, Blake, I trusted you and got a beautiful double-cross. Now I mean business. My fingertips are on fire. Something you did—something you put on those strands of hair. The Hindu just died and his fingers were like mine. What did you put on those coils of hair? What was it, so I can get to a doctor?"

"You don't need a doctor half as much as I do," Blake said. "That's why I'm in such a hurry. Listen, sergeant, I didn't kill those people. I'm not responsible for that itchy sensation on your fingertips, but I think I know what is and who provided it."

"I'm listening." Wilson seemed desperate enough to try anything.

"Then we must work fast. The real murderer just tried to kill me. He slashed my wrist and injected some kind of a poison. I've tried to counteract it, but I might not have been successful. Wilson, the strands of hair didn't kill those men. It was a substance on certain parchment papers which each victim received. The murderer is collecting them all."

"Then let's go see Martin," Wilson said quickly. He raised his hands and looked at the fingertips again. "The tingling sensation is getting worse. I don't mind telling you I'm scared. Plenty scared. Sometimes I also feel as though my muscles were getting stiff—just as Carrington's did before he died."

Blake said, "Sergeant, Martin can wait. You'd better take care of yourself. Listen—go to a good doctor as fast as you can travel. Tell him you want a strong shot of tetanus antitoxin."

"Tetanus?" Wilson paled.

"That's what Carrington and Newall died from. The Hindu, too, I'll bet. Maybe you got some of the stuff and there's no use taking chances."

"Okay," Wilson started away. "But Blake—how about you? Your hands were tingling, too."

"I'm okay—I hope," Blake said. "When I ran out on you, I headed for a doctor's office. That's why I beat it. Fay encouraged me, but I didn't need much. I was scared—just as you are now. The doctor gave me a good dose of antitoxin."

"I'm on my way," Wilson said. "Where shall I meet you?"

"Phone the Hindu's apartment," Blake said. "I'm going there to have a look around. Everything seemed to start there so it's possible I might find a clue."

"I'll phone," Wilson promised. "If I'm not dead."

Blake hurried out of the place, rushed to the next corner, and just as he headed for a taxi, he groaned. He didn't have a dime. The Hindu's apartment was a twenty-minute walk, but Blake made it in less than fifteen.

HE RANG the superintendent's bell, got the buzzer and opened the door. He raced up the stairs two at a time, rounded the corner and started along the third flight of steps. Halfway up, he heard a thudding sound, raised his head and saw something huge and round catapulting toward him.

Blake quickly flattened himself against the bannister, but it was too late. The object seemed to grow larger and larger. Blake was aware that the lights had been extinguished here. Only the faint amount of yellow light from the downstairs hall illuminated the eerie object that bounced and rolled toward him.

The object struck, bounced away and hit the stairs again. Blake, reeling under the impact, lost his balance and fell backwards. He rolled down the steps to the landing and lay there, sore all over and frightened.

He arose slowly, saw the round object rolling back and forth in a corner and advanced toward it. Then he gave a low laugh. It was a big medicine ball. Perhaps it had been used to

delay him. Climbing the steps again, he was more cautious. He reached the Hindu's door, tried the knob and swore softly. The door was locked. Unless he broke through it, entrance was impossible.

He hesitated only a moment or two. That fall had created a terrific din and yet no one had come to investigate. That meant the tenants must be out on the second and third floors. Either that, or several apartments were empty. Blake drew back, poised and got set to crash the door.

He relaxed and gaped. An intense

fear assailed him again. The door gave a sharp click and then began to open very slowly. Blake thought of the Hindu and his magic. Of the witch who had been dead two hundred years and whose hair was supplying the ghastly means of murder which had struck down two men already.

He had no weapon of any kind except bare fists, yet this was no time to retreat. He moved toward the door, now partly open. He gave it a hard kick. The door flew back with a bang.

Inside, the Hindu's apartment was very dark. Blake reached for a light switch, snapped it and nothing happened. The lights had been disconnected somehow.

He took a couple of experimental steps into the apartment and shivered. Its owner was dead—a victim of his own particular kind of poisonous magic. The place seemed to crawl with horror.

Blake made sure the door would remain open in case he had to retreat hastily. His wounded wrist ached and he set his teeth in determination. Wrist or no wrist, he was going to see this thing through.

Then he became aware of a slight, bluish glow that grew steadily brighter until he saw what caused it. The strange light came from the Hindu's crystal ball. It reposed on a small table now, behind a filmy screen of thin curtains.

"Who—who is there?" Blake asked, and his voice echoed through the empty apartment.

He gulped, motioned with his good arm until he encountered a straight-backed chair and picked this up as a weapon. Then he froze in his tracks. A laugh—more of a gibbering cackle than anything else—came from behind the blue-tinged crystal ball.

"Listen," Blake snapped, "either talk or I'll heave this—"

"The chair, Mr. Blake? It would not harm me. Nothing can harm me because I have been dead for two hundred years. I am a friend of Chinu, who is also dead. I am the witch through whom he has gained all of his powers to see into the future."

"Well, you'd better look into your own future," Blake yelled, "because I'm coming."

"Wait!" The high-pitched voice stopped him again. "You do not believe me. Then I shall tell you your future. It is very short. You will be dead soon because another person has bestowed upon you the same degree of hatred which you administered to others."

"Who," Blake asked, "is that other person?"

"You may enter and examine the crystal ball if you wish. You will see the face of that man."

Hardly knowing why he was following these instructions, Blake put the chair down, brushed open the thin curtains and walked slowly toward the crystal ball. All he could see behind it was an empty chair. The blue crystal seemed to draw his eyes and hold them. It began to glow brighter and brighter. He bent over it.

Then his near-hypnotic lethargy was suddenly broken when a thick arm wound about his neck. Blake squirmed with all his strength, but that grip was strong and cleverly applied. Blake used his feet and encountered shins of material dimensions. At least he wasn't fighting any two-hundred-year-old ghost.

The kicks also elicited grunts of pain. Very human grunts, and they lent more courage to Blake's endeavors. He reached up with his good hand and grasped a handful of hair. With a violent wrench, he tried to break the strangling grip and did.

Blake was suddenly flung away to the accompaniment of a savage oath from the killer. Blake started to get up and paused just beside the table where that crystal ball was still glowing. He could vaguely see a figure swathed in a long robe. Some kind of a cowl covered the killer's features, but the gun he held wasn't covered. It centered on Blake.

"I should have done this in the first place," the killer cackled in that high-pitched false voice. "This time I won't fail."

Blake tensed. There was nothing he could do now but leap straight into the menace of that gun. He'd die, but if he could wrench that veil off the killer, have a look at his features—

A BELL rang, loudly, raucously. The killer was obviously startle by it, for he suddenly whirled. Blake reached up with his good hand, seized the heavy crystal ball and hurled it just as the murderer turned back to finish his work.

The crystal ball had an electric light cord hooked to it, but the cord was long and the wire free. Blake's aim was good, too, because the crystal ball hit that fake ghost squarely on the chest. The killer reeled backwards, turned and ran madly into the darkness.

Blake was after him in a flash. He heard a bedroom door open, saw something go hurtling inside and plunged through the doorway after it. The door closed, a key turned and Blake groaned. He'd been tricked again. By using a match, he found he'd only pursued the robe and veiling of the fake ghost.

The bell was still ringing and Blake remembered that Wilson was to phone him here. Unknowingly, Wilson had saved his life. Blake attacked the door, smashed it and reached the phone.

"What's the matter?" Wilson asked. "I was about ready to rush over there."

"Plenty has happened, but we can't do anything about it here, sergeant. Meet me at the north corner of the block where Martin lives. I'm not far away so get there fast."

Wilson did. He was parked at the corner when Blake ran up and piled into the car.

"Okay," Blake said, "stop at Martin's house. I wonder where Fay is?"

Wilson applied brakes. "I don't know, but I think we'll doggone soon find out. There's Fay's car parked in front of Martin's house."

Martin himself let them in. He was clad in a dressing robe and pajamas.

"Yes," he answered Blake's question. "Fay is here. In my study." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I'm glad you two showed up. I'm afraid of Fay."

They marched into the study and Fay arose. He seemed oddly pale and he said nothing.

Blake turned to Martin. "We can't waste a moment. I know exactly what killed Carrington, Newall and the Hindu. Martin—did you receive one of those parchments attesting to the dissolving of your firm? It came in a metal tube."

"Why — yes," Martin hesitated. "It's in my drawer. I don't know who had it drawn up, but it is a very nice gesture. Never heard of such a thing though—to inscribe a parchment with the terms of dissolving a partnership."

"Where is it?" Blake asked. "Get it, man. Every second counts."

Martin waddled over to a desk, opened a drawer and took out a metal tube. He unscrewed the cap, drew out the parchment and held it between his fingers. Blake rushed over to him and seized the empty tube.

Martin said, "I really don't know what this is all about, but I assure you—"

"Martin," Blake broke in. "This tube wasn't addressed to you. It's Fay's. The one that was stolen from him not long ago. The address is his."

Martin's fingers parted and the parchment fell to the floor. He raised his hands and peered at his fingertips. Then he let out a screech, backed up and made a dive toward the desk.

The drawer was still open. His hand dipped into it and came out holding a gun. Blake was in action before Martin could get the weapon into position for shooting. He launched himself in a flying leap that carried nim clear over the top of the desk. Martin went down. The gun flew out of his hand and Fay pounced upon it.

Wilson joined in the scrap and twenty seconds later Martin was plumped into a chair while Fay kept the gun pressed against the back of the killer's neck.

"You knew you'd given the game away when you dropped that parchment and examined your fingertips," Blake accused. "You killed your business partners, Martin. Killed them to get your hands on the money the four of you had accumulated. You saw a chance to hang the blame on me, too. You hired the Hindu to encourage me to send out those strands of hair. They were harmless."

"But my fingers . . ." Wilson protested. "I handled some of those hairs. You did, too. We've got the same thing that Carrington, Newall and the Hindu had."

"Not quite," Blake said. "The murders were committed through the use of those heavy pieces of parchment paper. The victim naturally studied the documents closely. One side of the paper—unless my guess is all wrong —is coated with an acid to penetrate the skin. The other side contains a coating of tetanus germs. The acid would provide the means of entrance to the blood stream. The germs are of particularly virulent character. Martin faked his illness."

MARTIN looked up and a cruel smile crossed his lips. "You won't get any benefit out of this, Blake. You'll be dead in an hour or two."

Blake nodded. "I was afraid of that. You see, Martin, I know you attacked me in Newall's home. You slit my wrist and forced some of the bacteria into the wound. That was the moment when I changed my mind about Fay being responsible for all this."

"But I still don't understand," Fay said.

"It's easy," Blake smiled weakly. "You and I visited a doctor after we escaped from police headquarters. You heard me ask the doctor for a stiff injection of tetanus antitoxin. I got it, too, so if you had been the killer, you'd have slit my throat and not bothered with the bacteria culture because the antitoxin in my blood would probably prevent the bacteria from acting."

Martin was slowly growing whiter and whiter. He looked at his fingers and shivered violently. Blake gave him no chance to talk. He turned toward the now thoroughly frightened killer.

"Martin, you didn't leave Newall's house after you attacked me. You simply hid somewhere and heard me tell Sergeant Wilson about getting an antitoxin injection. You knew I wouldn't die and for your own safety

I had to. You heard me say I was going to the Hindu's place, so you set another trap for me that didn't work."

"Antitoxin," Martin screamed. "Get me a doctor. I handled Fay's parchment. I must be full of the stuff. Get me a doctor. Get me antitoxin. I'll die."

"No, you won't," Blake cut in sharply. "The parchment you handled wasn't Fay's, but I knew you'd stolen all of them and I hoped that there would be a certain amount of confusion in your mind so you'd forget where you put the others and I could then convince you that the one you held was deadly. That was your own perfectly harmless parchment, Martin."

"Well, I'm convinced," Wilson said. "He murdered the Hindu, too, I suppose.

"Martin had to get rid of the Hindu so he sneaked into his quarters," Blake explained, "put some of the acid on the strands of hair and then probably impregnated the inside of the Hindu's glove fingers with bacteria. The Hindu always wore gloves when he went out. Martin knew we'd suspect him and lock him up. The Hindu was a weak spot and had to be got rid of. All we did was get some of that acid on our fingers."

Sergeant Wilson heaved a great sigh of relief.

Blake motioned to Fay. "Would you mind driving me to a hospital? I may not have enough antitoxin to offset the germs Martin injected. I'm quite sure a few of them entered my system though, because Martin severed a vein and the blood spurted. I hope it washed most of the germs away."

"Let's not take any chances," Fay said. "Good heavens, I don't want to lose my new business partner. We'll straighten out the Acme affair in no time and create a new office. Come on —let's go."


# "I Talked with God"

**(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)**

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do if there is poverty unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 42, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

# Pardon My Poison

*By David X. Manners*

*A devil's cauldron is stirred when a sharp-minded detective concocts a hot-seat cocktail.*

SMITH was at the Golden Eagle bar, toying with a Martini, when the shifty-eyed stranger sidled in beside him. The stranger was dressed in a gray suit, was big and looked about sixty.

Smith saw all this in the back-bar mirror, for up to this moment Smith had been admiring his own dapper, clean-cut appearance reflected there. He was proud of his precisely waxed moustache and the shiny black glint of his hair. He was sure when he met Susie at the station in just about an hour that she would fall for him. All women did.

But now the stranger intruded on his thoughts. There was a noticeable bulge under the man's left armpit that bespoke a shoulder holster and gun. And those shifty eyes of the stranger missed not a single person who went to or from the bar.

"Looking for someone?" Smith asked a little irritably when he felt the eyes of the stranger rake him.

"Matter of fact, I am," said the stranger, whose appearance was altogether undistinguished. "I'm a detective. I study faces. I never forget one."

"You must have had a great many interesting experiences," said Smith with mild sarcasm. "I don't suppose you like to talk about them."

"On the contrary," said the big stranger. "I do like to talk about them. And I'm on a very interesting case right now, though it's nine years old. Would you like to hear about it?"

Smith hesitated. His past life was strictly in order and there was nothing he had to fear from the law. And there was about an hour he had to kill before he met Susie at the station. Still . . .

"Let's go sit in the booth," said the detective. "This story will slay you. But let me buy you a drink first." He turned to Amedeo, the barkeep. "Shine up a glass for the gentleman," he said. "And mix him one of my specials." Then he turned back to Smith again. "I usually recommend drinking this flat on the floor." He laughed. "Then you don't have so far to fall."

Smith sat in the booth, gently holding the glass with the tips of his fingers, as the detective began his story. But Smith didn't put the drink to his lips.

He was afraid to.

JOE LENGLIN was a very foxy man (so the detective's story went). He sat on a high stool in the rear of his small, upstate drugstore and compounded a prescription. He smiled as he compounded it—for the prescription was one he had formulated himself.

It was death.

He finished preparing the two capsules and put them in on top of the box, which he carefully resealed, so that it presented an untampered appearance.

The ringing of the store's bell announced the entrance of someone at the front door.

Uncle Si said, "You got my vitamin capsules ready yet?"

Uncle Si nodded with approval a moment later as Joe Lenglin handed him the box he had just finished preparing. They were A, B, D and G with B-1 added, pills. All except the top two—the ones Uncle Si would be first to take. They were cyanide capsules.

"No, never mind any pay," Joe Lenglin said to him. "They're with my compliments."

He watched the bent-shouldered oldster carefully to see if the man suspected anything. Uncle Si was not really Joe's uncle. Six months before, Joe had run an ad in the paper. It went something like this:

> Refined gentleman, 35, would like to meet mature lady of independent means, and who appreciates the finer things in life. Object matrimony.

Joe had received about a hundred answers to that personnel column ad. He had very carefully selected and sifted them before he decided that "Betty" would be his wife. In addition to a drugstore, Betty was worth fifty thousand dollars. It was only after he married Betty that he discovered it was Betty's uncle—Uncle Si—who had the fifty thousand, and that Betty would not be in line to inherit it until the old codger was out of the way.

Joe was happy enough, at first, about that. Uncle Si had a very bad heart, and he was supposed to "pop off" at any moment. But lately Uncle Si had seemed to be stronger and more robust than ever—and a little too curious about Joe's past life—and two previous wives of Joe's who had died rather prematurely, after making Joe the beneficiary in their wills.

Joe watched Uncle Si hobble out of the dinky little drugstore. He wondered if it was the last time he would see Uncle Si alive. Joe knew that cyanide was about the most powerful poison there was. The only catch was that it could be detected—first, by the immediacy with which it took effect. And, second, by its telltale bitter almond odor.

Joe could not help chuckling to himself over how well he had taken care of both those drawbacks. It had simply involved coating the cyanide capsules with a substance called "keratin." Keratin was a wonderful substance that the stomach fluids had no effect on whatsoever. It could not be digested until it reached the intestines—which took a couple hours. Then the keratin would be dissolved, the cyanide released—and poor Uncle Si would "pop off."

Joe calculated it to himself. Tonight was Wednesday—Jackpot night at the movie. Uncle Si never missed. He'd take his vitamin capsule right after dinner and then go off by himself to the movie. It would certainly look like he'd been stricken with heart trouble when the ushers found him at closing time still sitting in his seat. It would—

A sharp cry outside jerked Joe from his thoughts. He paused wonderingly, a moment, then hurried to the front door. He could see the crowd gathering about something in front of the small town's hay and grain store.

Joe did not bother locking his own store. He hurried up the street. He glimpsed Uncle Si lying on the walk, his face a peculiar grayish pallor.

Webb Keene, the local town marshal, saw Joe as he hurried up. He put out a restraining hand to stop him, shook his head sadly. "It looks bad," he said. "He's gone—your Uncle Si is."

"His heart?" gasped Joe innocently.

"Wa-al—either that, or *something else!*" Keene eyed Joe sharply, as if he were trying to look all the way through him. "It was something that took him mighty quick, at any rate."

Joe averted his face from the suspicious old lawman as he swallowed hard. It was Si's heart that had given out, he knew. It couldn't be anything else. If he had taken one of those coated cyanide tablets it wouldn't act for a couple of hours!

SUDDENLY Joe's own heart began to beat very fast. He was a fool! If he had only held off and waited, and let things take their course naturally. Now he was in a mess. He'd better get that box with its poison pills off Uncle Si before some of these local yokels found it, and began to get nosy.

He had his chance when it came to carrying Uncle Si's body into the undertaker's. Joe deftly slipped his hand in Uncle Si's pocket and lifted the package. His fingers closed concealingly about it.

Joe was back at the drugstore and about to toss the incriminating box with its capsules into the stove when the bell announcing the opening of the front door swung him about. He turned away from the stove.

Marshal Keene stepped down the store's aisle. He pointed an accusing finger at Joe Lenglin. "I seen you," he said. "I seen you take something off pore Si's body. What was it? What was that you took out of his pocket?"

Joe moved in behind the counter. He was trembling and a cold sweat was jumping clammily between his shoulder blades. He had to get rid of that box quick. With the tail of his eye he glimpsed the half-inch space between the end of the counter and the wall. He let the box drop in that crevice, his movement so casual that Keene could not observe it.

"What are you talking about?" Joe demanded. "You're not making sense."

"I'm making plenty sense," the marshal insisted. "You stand to inherit fifty thousand simoleons on this deal." He swept his arm around to indicate the vast array of drugs in the store. "I'm orderin' an autopsy—and I'm bettin' we'll find your uncle was poisoned to death!"

With that exclamation he stalked out of the store, stopping for a minute to pick up an empty soda glass on the fountain counter, and stare into it, as if he expected to see poison there.

Joe was stricken. When they cut his uncle open he knew they would find poison. Uncle Si had been dosing himself with arsenic for some ailment or other. He'd been doing it on his own hook, without a doctor's prescription, and he'd been taking it long enough to work up a tolerance so that he could take quite a slug without its having any ill effect on him whatsoever.

Joe felt his shirt stick to the clammy sweat on his back. This would be a fine how-de-do if they arrested him for a murder that he intended to do, but never quite got around to! Joe sank back into a chair with a hollow groan. Maybe it was right—what they said—that you couldn't get away with crime. No, he had come out clean on a couple little items he'd done in the past. Maybe, ironically, they'd sew him up tight now for one item he'd never done!

Joe's jaw jutted suddenly. He made up his mind. There wasn't going to be any autopsy. He was ready to do what he must, when he stepped into the coroner's office a little later.

But the coroner, a little fat man, surprised him. "No," he told Joe. "There isn't going to be any autopsy. No call for it. I know Marshal Keene is all excited, and says he wants one. But you don't have to look twice to see Uncle Si died natural."

THE big, gray-suited detective sipped slowly on the last of his drink. Smith had not yet touched his.

"And that's the way it was," the detective concluded. "Joe Lenglin inherited his fifty thousand, sold out his drug store a couple months later—and skidooed. I saw him just before he left town. Relatives of his wife called me in to investigate private like, when the wife died of a fall down some stairs. They had a notion he might have pushed her, but we never could prove nothin'."

The detective drew a long breath. "Of course, that was before we found a box of vitamin tablets, wrote up as

a prescription in Joe's own handwriting for his Uncle Si—with a couple of keratin-coated cyanide tablets on top of the box. It was the box Joe had slipped down between counter and wall!"

The detective stared at Smith in sudden amazement. "Why, you're not drinking!" he said. And then when Smith shook his head to indicate he didn't want it, the detective took the drink for himself, touching only the rim of the glass with his fingers.

"You said it's been nine years," Smith said, speaking for the first time. "You think you'll be able to recognize Joe Lenglin?"

The detective smiled. "Trust me never to forget a face," he said "I don't care how Lenglin may have altered his appearance: dyed hair, bridgework to alter the configuration of his mouth—or anything else. Anyway, fingerprints never change—and we got a nice copy of his—off that little box of poison pellets."

The detective rose abruptly. "Excuse me a moment," he said. "I've got to make a phone call. I'll be right back." And he picked up his handkerchief as he left the table.

Smith licked suddenly dry lips. His heart was hammering. Dyed hair; bridgework; fingerprints. . .

He glanced across the table to where his own glass had been setting a moment before. His fingerprints were surely on it! That was what the detective had picked up so gingerly with a handkerchief! *The glass!*

And now the detective had gone to call his confederate!

Smith moved fast.

He took three different taxicabs in weaving his way across town. He stopped at his apartment only long enough to pick up some cash—that and a week-old copy of a newspaper that carried this personel ad: "Refined gentleman, 35, would like to meet cultured lady of means . . . etc." That and a most intriguing reply from a woman who signed herself "Susie," and who had a hundred thousand dollars in her own right.

Smith took a taxi to Pennsylvania Station. He was glad that this was New York City, and not that small upstate whistlestop where he'd had a drugstore. It was so much easier to lose a trail in New York.

Smith glanced at Gate 11 in the great terminal. At this very moment Susie should be arriving. Smith could not forbear just one look in that direction. Perhaps he could gather her up, using almost any excuse, and have her come along with him. It was a pity to waste the opportunity.

He moved toward Gate 11—and then he saw the big, gray-suited detective coming through it.

Smith lurched, moved to dart through the crowd. The detective was after him like a shot. Smith felt the coat rip off his back. He swung about, slammed a fist at the detective's face. The detective ducked. His fist whooshed hard into Smith's midsection.

Smith felt as if he had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. When he tried to struggle up off the floor, he found that no less than fifty cops were sitting on his ear.

He did manage to get a glimpse of the detective's grinning face. "You damn fool," the dick said. "You shouldn't have run. You should have stayed and bluffed it out. Your disguise is perfect. Nobody would have ever known you in a million years with that new face you fixed yourself up with. That fingerprint gag of mine was a blind stab—to see if it would make you run. We couldn't have identified you from Adam. We didn't have any fingerprints."

Smith's head was in a whirl, but through the fog one thing did come clear. "Then how did you track me?" he said. "I thought I did it perfect. Left no back trail. How did you know to come after me?"

The detective was still grinning. "It was that little ad in the paper," he said. "You see, *I'm Susie!*"

# Secret Agent Hex

*"Dizzy Duo" Yarn*

## *By Joe Archibald*

*Snooty Piper, that screwball newshawk, combines G-2 headwork with Commando tactics in a one-man homicide blitz.*

ONE afternoon around four-thirty in Mr. Guppy's *Evening Star* city room, Dogface Woolsey, the city editor, calls Snooty Piper over to the desk.

"Listen," Dogface snaps. "On your way home you can take this dough to Veronica Blake. She is in room six at the Beacon with a sprained ankle. She owes two weeks' rent so don't spend that hay in a penny arcade."

"I resent that," Snooty says. "Why can't Guppy afford messenger boys? So now I am a flunkey for a doll who writes a beauty column."

"Shut up and git goin'," Dogface says.

"Come on, Scoop."

We go over to the Hotel Beacon. I choose a comfortable seat in the lobby while Snooty Piper ankles up to the first floor to deliver the scratch to Veronica. I am reading how the Red Sox are doing when there comes a terrible bedlam from somewhere over my dome. It sounds like the Nertzie General Rommel has moved his desert blitz into the Beacon for a one-night stand. The house detective and the manager and some guests start running up the stairs and I follow.

Up on the first floor we find Snooty Piper being manhandled very roughly by a big character. Snooty is being glued against the wall by one of the irate citizen's hands and Snooty is trying to duck the straight jabs from the other one. Half of Snooty's apparel is strewn along the hall.

"I thought if I come home early one night, I would find the snake in

the grass," the individual who is blitzing Snooty howls. "Take that and those, you—"

"Here, here," the house dick says and goes to separate the combatants. "You can't do that here. This is a respectable—"

"Oh, no? Well, watch me knock the teeth out of this wolf," the character yelps as he smacks Snooty.

I get to the guy and wind my arms around his neck and the dick helps me peel him off Snooty Piper. Just then a doll comes out of a room and it is Veronica Blake.

"Why, I thought you was in room nine."

"Room six is where I just come from, Piper," Veronica said.

Then another doll appears and she is a nifty number wearing a housecoat and the character who assaulted Snooty scratches his dome and goes over to the door of his room.

"Why, it was a mistake, pal," the guy turns and says to Snooty. "One of them little nails fell loose on that brass door marker an' the nine slipped down an' made a six. Oh, I'm sorry pal. Look, I been suspicious of a guy an' I hid in the linen closet there an'—let me brush you off, pal."

"Help find my upper plate," Snooty sniffs. "Do I git the breaks?"

"You can say that again, Piper," Veronica says. "Give me the dough Dogface sent."

The smooch in the housecoat berates her spouse and says he should be ashamed of himself.

"Oh, yeah? Well, I'll keep tryin' an' I'll catch that home-wrecker yet, babe."

"I will send you my lawyer tomorrer," Snooty says. "Let's go to the Greek's, Scoop. A nine upside down—I could of been killed."

WE ARE halfway to the Greek's in Snooty's coupe when a tire blows out. Right in the middle of traffic.

"I have not a spare, Scoop," Snooty says to me. "This is awful. If I only had that steak I et in that beanery last night, I could patch the tube."

"Git that heap outa here," a cop says.

"Oh, what a night, Scoop! Sure, I'll just git out and pick it up an' carry it," Snooty says to the big traffic cop, then crabs toward the curb and stops.

We have to send for a towcar and it comes in time and hauls us to the nearest garage. The bite is five bucks for towing and ten bucks for a new shoe that does not look very safe even to drive over coffee grounds. Snooty signs a chit on the *Evening Star* just as if he had a right to.

"We'll pick it up in about a half hour," Snooty says.

We get a beer apiece and then go back and get the coupe. We are driving it out into traffic when we hear the sirens blowing and two cars loaded with gendarmes go by.

Snooty goes into high and follows the cops' chariots through the lights. By the time we hit Back Bay, his gas allowance is burned up and it is a very good thing a long hill happened to be handy as we coast into Brookline and stop at the gate of a very fashionable looking residence. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, who is on the books of Boston as a detective, is just being moved out of a police jalopy inside the gate. Getting Iron Jaw out of a car is like pulling a bag of oats through a slot in a mailbox. Iron Jaw grew up as big as four ordinary guys but his brains stayed the size they were at birth.

"How did you get here?" Iron Jaw yells as we come through the gate. "Was that you in that boiler follerin' us right through traffic?"

"It wasn't the president of the Morris Plan," Snooty says. "It is a good thing you was in the jalopy ahead of us as it cut its speed down at least thirty miles every hour. There is a card on the back of my car that says *Press*, Iron Jaw. Where is the corpse?"

"Awright, I give up," Iron Jaw growls. "But if you as much as bend over near this victim, I will see he has company where he's gone. An' I'll see the mayor about this in the mornin'. There ought t' be a law—"

"There is enough now you never could enforce," Snooty counters, and we follow the cops across a lawn and into a garden big enough to hunt tigers in. Near a summer house we see two citizens looking down at a third.

"Who found him?" Iron Jaw yelps. He kneels down beside a character who will never know how the war came out. Somebody has bashed in his noggin and they did not use a fly swatter.

"I did," a frightened domestic says. "I just happened to think I forgot flowers for the master's table an' so I went out and here he was. Oh, poor Mr. Grackle."

The character, we soon find out, is none other than Gurney P. Grackle, who has been a chemical engineer for as long as his flunkeys can remember. Only a week before, all the journals carried a story about Grackle. The citizen had been working behind closed doors for the U.S. Government and it was hinted that he had cooked up a synthetic gasoline that could make a garbage truck lick anything on the Indianapolis speedway.

"This is F.B.I. business, too," Iron Jaw says. "We better notify the Federals. You go an' phone, Dooley. No clues, huh?"

"It is awful," a thick-set citizen says. He is wearing a chauffeur's ensemble. "I git the boss home about five-thirty. He generally always goes into the garden an' takes a gander at how things are growin' as soon as he leaves the boiler. I took the heap into the garage an' was workin' on a bum fuel pump when I hear this dame screech."

"Somebody was lurkin' there an' waitin' for him," Iron Jaw says. "Did he have enemies?"

"Why should he?" I sniff. "Only the Axis countries an' their populations, if he really cooked up that pep water. How much do you think Adolf needs high test, Iron Jaw? As much as you need a brain. This is fifth-column stuff."

"Yeah," the cadaver connoisseur says and points at the ground in front of the corpse. It is soft dirt that is part of a new flower bed. "The impulse of a man like Grackle was to do what he did. Look! It was defiance to his murderers. A V for Victory. See, he made it with his forefinger."

"Yeah," Iron Jaw says. "That is the spirit that will make us win. Oh, I'd like to git my hands on that dirty assassin."

"Hasn't been dead more'n an hour," the medical examiner grunts.

Snooty crouches down close to the victim and Iron Jaw cuffs him one and then kicks him all the way to the summerhouse, which is about fifteen feet away. The structure sways and crackles and then something falls out of the tangle of climbing plants and thuds to the real estate. It is human as it yelps quite painfully. Snooty Piper covers the mysterious character like a blanket covers a squash and the law moves in and takes over.

IRON JAW stands the prowler up against a tree and asks him who he is and why did he kill Grackle. The guy is a foreign-looking number with heavy jowls and little piggy eyes.

"I didn't kill nopotty," the citizen says.

"Oh, a Nasty, huh?" Iron Jaw howls. "Come clean. Where is what you lifted off Grackle?"

"I kill nopotty. I coom back to der place to get der poison mixture I make up mineself to kill der Mexican beetles on der bean vines, yah," the little gink says. "So's Mr. Grackle he vill not find it und analice it to market himself. He fired me yesterday. I am going by der summerhouse vhen I hear peoples coming. It is polices

und der servants from der house. I climb in der vines."

"Ha," Iron Jaw scoffs. "Now tell it by me, der story of Hans und Gretel. You are a Nasty and you better hand over what you stole, see?"

"I do not haff der mixture or der writing vhich says how to make der Super-Octane X," Otto says.

"Who mentioned anything like that?" the big flatfoot says quick. "So that was it, hah? A confession right there, guys."

"All the papers said something about the synthetic gas," Snooty says. "Or do you just read the comics, Iron Jaw?"

The big slewfoot orders his helpers to search the garden near the summerhouse and they scatter. The morgue service is as good as usual and soon the late Gurney P. Grackle is on his way. Snooty sits down on a stone bench and if you poured flower over him he would look like Rodin's Thinker. You would think the crackpot had something to go on.

"Well, take the Nasty in," Iron Jaw says. "If the Feds want him they can have him, but they will have to admit that it was me who—"

"Hey, O'Shaughnessy, look what we got. Right in the roses near the summerhouse," a cop says. "It is the rubout weapon. A pair of bush pruners that must weigh six or seven pounds."

"Well, Otto," Iron Jaw says as he wraps Exhibit A in a handkerchief which you could use for a jib sail, "you might as well tell us what Bund you work for and where the formula is at. Why waste the country's dough, huh? Put the jewelry on him, Dooley."

"It was a good thing Iron Jaw threw you at the summerhouse, Snooty," I says. "I bet he won't even give you an assist in the box score though. Let's git goin'."

"We have no gas," Snooty says. "Remember?" Then he drops his chin on the back of one of his hands and plants an elbow on his knee to support the hand. He looks at the V that the murdered citizen left in the loam.

The chauffeur goes for Otto with a big rock and the gendarmes have to restrain him. I know how the citizen feels as anybody who would bite the hand that feeds him should be worked on, but as it is a free country even a Nertzie gets a fair trial.

When the cops leave, me and Snooty linger for a few minutes. Snooty asks the names of everybody. The chauffeur says he is Anton Skoda and is a Czech.

"No wonder you tried to slay the Nertzie," I says. "Look, my pal's jalopy is out of gas and we wondered if there was any extra about."

"I think I know where there's a can," Anton says. "Sometimes we carry an extra. I'll get it, sure."

We go down to the gate where Snooty's fugitive from a junk yard is standing. We sit in the coupe and wait for Anton.

"I cannot help but think of the dirty break I got earlier," Snooty says. "A nine upside down, Scoop. So I get the pants beat off me for nothin'."

"And Iron Jaw dislodges the murderer by using you as a missile," I says. "He gets the assasin, the bump-off weapon and everything. What'll we do next?"

"Where's that blankety-blank chauffeur?" Snooty sniffs. "Oh, there he is. With some gas. I should rate more'n an A card, Scoop. Oke, Anton, I have a funnel here." Snooty goes out and helps him put the vital sap into the old heap.

"Thanks, pal," we tell Anton. "We will try an' get you a front-row seat wherever Otto is liquidated."

"Yeah, the dirty spy," Anton snaps. "I was always suspicious of that guy. Maybe you'll mention my name in the newspaper."

"It is a promise," Snooty says. "For the gas."

The jalopy is partly in a ditch. Snooty gets it out and it jumps along the road like a toad with hiccups for

about a hundred yards. Then it stops. "I never was used to Grade A gasoline, Scoop. Or maybe the feed line got plugged.

"You are a liar," I says. "You tell me what you are thinkin'?"

"I was thinkin' of that nine upside down," the halfwit says. "Also about the murder of Grackle. Otto Schnopp did not do it."

"Look," I says. "I admit I have been too hasty about murders before, Snooty Piper. But when I see the assassin and the murder cudgel in the same place, I add one and one and git the answer. Start this heap up."

"Shh," Snooty says. "Somebody will hear us."

"Huh? Why? Are we in a bank after closing hours?" I snort.

"We are in a Nasty spy nest, Scoop."

SOMETIMES there is nothing you can say to Snooty Piper. All you want to do is murder him. I tell him to stop reading the comic books and going to too many B pictures on Scollay Square.

"You can either go with me, or sit here and wait," Snooty says. "I am going to double back. Of course if Iron Jaw has the wrong character as usual, the Nasties will leave no stone upturned or nobody alive if they think of getting away.

"Awright, Secret Agent Hex," I says, feeling cold from my lumbar regions up to where my hair is parted. "Let's play games."

We climb a stone fence and cut through the garden. We sneak up on the big house from the back and there is a light in the kitchen. We get close to the window and Snooty says under his breath, "V for victory, Scoop."

"V is also for Victim," I shudder. "This is silly."

"Shh. Look, Scoop."

I can see through a crack about an inch wide at the bottom of a drawn shade. Anton Skoda is sitting in the kitchen with a blonde cupcake. They have their domes so close together, they look like they might be necking. They are talking gibberish so we can't find out what is cooking. Anton takes a big envelope out of his pocket and it has got about ten wax seals on it. The blonde doll's eyes widen and she makes a grab at it. Anton grins and puts it back in his pocket.

"That is the formula or I am Hitler's new hangman," Snooty hisses. "Look, the doll is picking up a small suitcase. They are gettin' ready to scram."

"But Otto—" I says, my blood getting like raspberry sherbert. "He was there with the weapon an'—"

"Shh, Scoop!"

"Get 'em, guys!" we hear somebody whisper very hoarsely and then we are attacked from behind and dragged toward a big fish pond and thrown in.

"Don't come up the third time, Piper," we hear a muffled familiar voice say. It is Iron Jaw and no fooling.

The splash we made warned the Nasties and they saw the cops coming and knocked the lights out. We see the house is dark when we climb out and there is a sound inside like an elephant was running amok, looking for peanuts. Then we hear a car start up and it is no cops' car unless they have been handed one with sixteen cylinders during the last hour or two.

"They are gettin' away," Snooty yelps. "Let's hurry, Scoop."

"As quick as I can get this turtle from inside my shirt," I gasp. "He bites. Oh, Iron Jaw kept you covered this time, Snooty."

We skirt the corner of the house and see the big limousine flying down the driveway to the gate. Three cops jump clear in the nick of time and somebody shoots out of the back of the limousine and sends a slug so close to my scalp I smell my hair burning.

Iron Jaw and three big flatfeet

pour out of the house and get in a jalopy.

"They'll head for the closest salt water," Iron Jaw bellows. "We'll overtake them Nasties."

"You big porpoise," Snooty yips. "If they git away, I'll tell Washington that you—come on, Scoop. We must git to the coupe."

"Look, stupe," I says between gasps. "You couldn't overtake a turtle with that can. Look, how did you know it was Anton—"

"We can try to git them criminals," Snooty says. "We got to beat them cops, Scoop, or they will git all the credit for it. Hurry, will you?"

THE limousine is out of sight and hearing when we get to Snooty's coupé. The cops have a start of twenty blocks on us, too. It looks like Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has read the story of the worm that turned at last.

Snooty starts up the jalopy and steps on it. It seems to jump four hundred feet before the wheels hit again.

"Boy, what power," Snooty yells at me. "I never knew what real high test was. I—"

"Turn the corner," I holler. "You can't cut through a brick warehouse. Oh-h-h!" I cover my eyes as we squeal around the corner and then I have the sensation of flying. I look up and wished I hadn't. The fenders are curling up and the radiator cap comes loose and flies back through the windshield.

"Snooty," I yelp, "what is happenin'? This wreck won't hold together at this pace. Stop it. Put on the brakes will you?"

"You know they are no good, Scoop," Snooty says. "Why did you think I ditched it before to stop it? I know, Scoop. Look, that is a police car up ahead, huh?"

"Blow your horn, then. Why, that car had a big start on us."

"The horn is disconnected, Scoop. Shut up as I am trying to tell you why we—oops, there goes the police jalopy as it was either it or our boiler, Scoop. It climbed that bank. It is because that can of gas Anton give us is—"

"You have got to pass that other car up there, Snooty," I screech. "It will be at the curve when we pass it, too. Oh, I can't look. You will find my identification in my other suit, Snooty. What makes this heap act up?"

"I'm — trying — to — tell you, S-Scoop," Snooty yelps as he swings the wheel. "It is Super-Octane X, that gas Grackle was workin' on. It —is—for—airplanes, Scoop!"

"Let me out of here, then," I says. "I am not young enough to be an aviator. We will black out if we go any faster. You mean Anton—got the wrong can of gas, huh? Maybe Grackle put it there an' forgot to tell Anton what it was, huh?"

"It is four cylinders against sixteen, Scoop," Snooty says and you would have thought the nitwit was just sitting on a park bench the way he said it. He does not seem to remember that all of his four tires are as thin as the skin on a sausage and that his inner tubes have got more patches in them than a hobo's rompers. If one goes, I know where I will go. It will be where I can ask Grackle what is in the gas he cooked up.

"It must be very special gas," Snooty says. "Regular high-octane would blow this buggy up as high as a blimp."

We pass the second police car. Snooty asks did I hear a scraping sound and I says I think so as we have somebody's fender dangling from our headlight.

"I saw a derby hat, too," I choke out. "I hope there was not a head in it as you know whose that would be."

"Boy, we passed them like they was nailed, Scoop," Snooty says. "Iron Jaw will try and steal our bread and butter, huh, Scoop?"

"You mean our manna," I says.

"That is the stuff you eat where we will stop overnight. Look, we're even goin' faster, Snooty, and them tires —look, stop please. Snooty Piper, I am pleading with you like a—"

"Our wheels are not even touchin' the ground only once every mile, Scoop. Look up ahead. Is that a limousine?"

"I can't look until my eyes get back into the front again. Since the windshield went out, they—will you try and stop this thing, Snooty? I am scairt!"

"V for Victory, Scoop. Maybe the outcome of the war is at stake if them Nasties git away. Iron Jaw was right for once. They are takin' a short cut to the ocean where there is a boat waitin'. It is some gas Grackle made and we have to git the formula for it for the U.S. air corps. Hang on, Scoop, as we are Commandos."

"How did you know Otto didn't do it?—Snooty, look out as a train is coming across that crossin'!"

"We will beat it, Scoop. It is only goin' about seventy."

We make it. I swallow my ticker and hold it in place and then I have to look around to see where my stomach is.

"You asked me a question, Scoop. About Otto, huh? Grackle told us as plain as day," Snooty tosses at me and then I see the limousine off in the distance. I smell salt water and I am sure we are somewhere close to Marblehead or Gloucester.

"We got the Nasties, Scoop," Snooty says and turns a corner on one wheel. I could swear the tin can didn't hit the concrete until we caught up with the fifth columnists in the V-sixteen.

"That is nice," I gulp out. "How are we goin' to stop an' arrest them, Snooty?"

"That sand out there is soft and will act as brakes," Snooty says and follows the limousine off the road.

The big boiler skids in the sand and crashes into a row of bathhouses, and planks and two-by-fours fill the air as we hit the sand. Our jalopy, shedding two fenders and a wheel, heads for a nice comfy looking cottage and goes right up on the porch and falls apart.

Me and Snooty crawl down the steps and Snooty is worse off than I am. He wants to know did we get the Messerschmitt before the cannon shell hit us.

"We'll git the Victoria Cross, Scoop," Snooty says. "We are two of the so few who so many owe so much to, huh? Do you think we landed this side of the channel though?"

"Hurry and git yourself together," I says. "I have found out I am in one piece. The Nasties are escaping maybe. Come on as Anton an' the doll—"

"Oh, I know now, Scoop. Where are they? Come on. There they are, crawling from out of that pile of wood and auto parts. Boy, did they smear that bathhouse!"

WE PICK up pieces of driftwood and attack the Nertzies. Anton Skoda, the phoney Czech, fires a gun at us but only from memory as he is in the midst of a dimout and he shoots a seagull. The blonde fifth columnist starts walking around in a circle like she is looking for pretty seashells. We go over and capture her while Anton empties all the shells in his Betsy.

Half the police cars in Eastern Massachusetts are clogging the roads up above and then four or five flatfeet come down after us and they all have sub-machine guns. One of them is Iron Jaw with only one pant leg and one sleeve in his coat.

"I told you we sideswiped that police car, Snooty," I says as we keep firm grasps on our prisoners.

"Oh, you menace to society!" Iron Jaw trumpets. "What was that you were ridin' in, hah? That heap of yours never could go that fast."

"We had Super-Octane X in the tank," Snooty says. "Anton loaned it to us. Meet Anton Skoda who

knocked off Gurney Grackle and stole his plans for the Super-Octane X. And here is Mata Hari the Second. Boy, what a night! It was a good thing it was moonlight. Tsk-tsk, Iron Jaw. Tryin' to steal the fruit of my nimble brain."

"Okay, I didn't git away with it," the big goon growls. "How did you know Otto didn't do it?"

"Look," Snooty says. "This mornin', I got into a mess because somethin' that was supposed to be right side up got turned upside down. A figure nine. I kept thinkin' about it an' when I saw the V Grackle made in the dirt—well, listen everybody. We looked at the V from in front of the corpse, didn't we? So what Grackle was writing was upside down to us.

"I looked at it from the other angle and so it was a V upside down and I says to myself he was making a letter A but passed into the great beyond before he could put a bar across it. He was tryin' to tell who crocked him and was not thinking of V for Victory."

"Oh, cripes," I moan and sit down.

"So I asked all the Crackle flunkeys their names and when I heard Anton's, I said he will bear watching. So we doubled back an' eavesdropped on the Nertzies. Anyway, Anton got his hand scratched when he planted the bush pruners in the stuff near the summerhouse. You didn't notice?"

"Okay," Anton says. "You got me an' Greta. We work for Adolph Hitler. Heil! Heil, Hitler!"

"Bah!" Greta says. "Heel Hitler. Sometimes I ask myself why I fall for that stuff. What a heck of a way to make money. Well, hand over the envelope, Anton. It is *kaput!*" . . . .

Anton shakes his head sadly. "And I even hand the Super-Octane X to these two rag-rats," Anton says. "How am I to know the boss put it there to try out and not tell me? I let Grackle out in the yard and drove the boiler into the garage. I knew he always went into the garden before he went into the house so I slip out of the back of the garage, waylay him, and let him have it. I pushed the pruner into the vines and ramblers near the summerhouse and then beat it. I heard him say he was going to get the formula out of the safe in his office and bring it home."

"I believe that gas is what it is cracked up to be," I says. "No fuelin'! Ha."

"You was flyin' when you passed us," Dooley says. "You took Iron Jaw's sleeve and pant leg off without skinning his hide. Well, you got to try again, O'Shaughnessy."

"Oh, yeah?" Iron Jaw pules, sour grape juice soaking him all the way through. "Let me just itemize things. Piper drove eleven cars off the road. The mayor of Lynn was in one and they had to take him to the hospital and put a traction splint on him. One car went through the window of a store and ruined ten thousand dollars worth of furs. Piper crashed eighty-one traffic lights, too."

"Whew!" I groan. "Is that all, Iron Jaw?"

"Yeah. Who's going to settle up for all them things, Piper?"

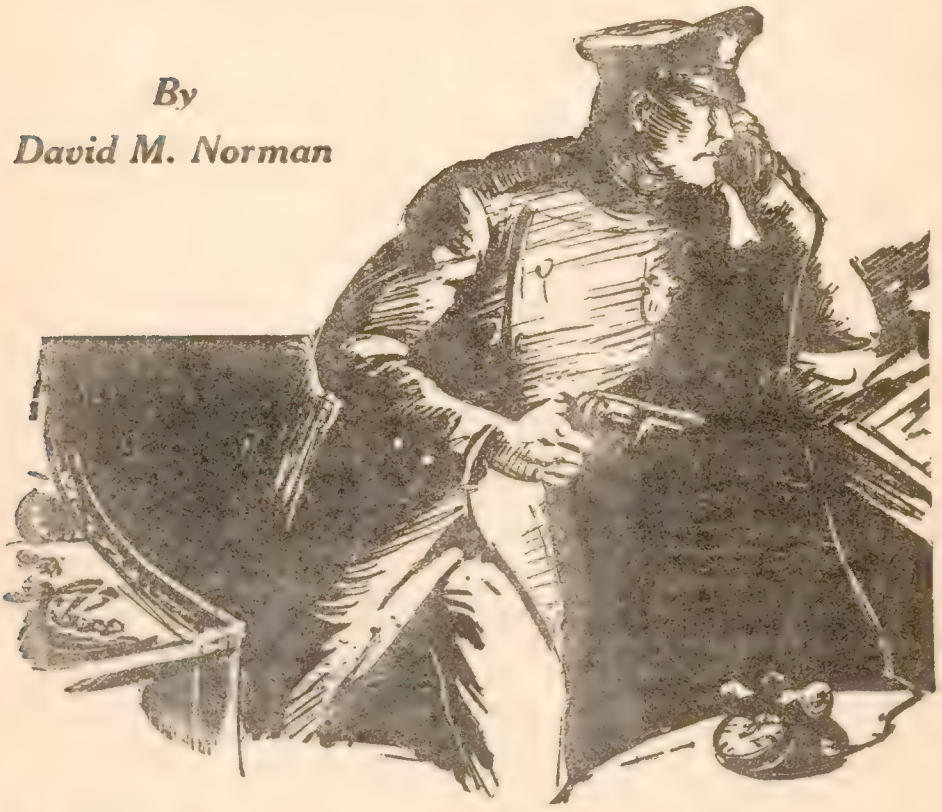
"I know who," Snooty says, brushing a sleeve off his awful green suit. "A citizen who lives in the White House. I not only proved how good Super-Octane X was, but I also captured two dangerous fifth columnists. Scoop, stop that worrying and also stop biting your nails. Where are the photographers as this should be good enough for 'Life.' "

"That's what I think you will still get," Iron Jaw says.

Iron Jaw was wrong as usual. Me and Snooty Piper were on the radio the next night telling everybody how we captured the Nertzies. We heard Iron Jaw tore the wires loose from his set and threw it out the window. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy went to work on him as she found out she couldn't get it fixed in time to hear her favorite soap opera. The things that happen to him!

# Suicide by Request

*By*
*David M. Norman*



*Professor King was driving headquarters wild. For instead of trying to make the police believe him innocent, he was seeking new evidence to prove himself guilty!*

PROFESSOR BEMIS KING, head of State University's chemistry department, was something of a venerated figure. He was short, slightly stoop-shouldered and bald as a bowling ball. He invariably had a brief case tucked under one arm—just as he had now.

Nobody would have suspected that today Professor King had anything more on his mind other than his lectures for tomorrow. King turned a corner, glanced at his old-fashioned pocket watch and then slowed up. He was on a side street that was never very busy, especially at this early evening hour.

He made certain nobody observed him and then he stepped up to a trash can, hurriedly thrust his brief case into it and covered it up with rubbish. This done, he resumed his walk and eventually he was rounding the corner to police headquarters.

The desk sergeant was named Ames. Professor King knew him. He'd flunked the sergeant's boy twice. Ames never held this against the professor. Perhaps he knew his son too well.

"Hello, professor." Sergeant Ames

thrust his hand across the big desk. "What on earth brings you to the police station?"

"I've lost my brief case," King answered. "Very careless of me. Had a number of valuable papers in it."

"Rest easy," Sergeant Ames said. "If that's all it contained, someone will bring it in. The kind of papers you write can't be read by anybody. Now, what did the case look like?"

"Well, it was black . . . or no. Perhaps it was brown. I'm not sure. I've two or three brief cases. Now let me think. Two black ones. A third that is brown. I—really don't know, sergeant. May I phone my home?"

Ames pushed the telephone over. Professor King picked up the receiver and dialed. He held the receiver very hard against his ear for about three minutes. Then he shrugged and hung up.

"My housekeeper must be out. Trading down the street, possibly. My son seems to be off somewhere too. Do you mind if I wait a few minutes and try again?"

"Help yourself." Ames waved toward the hard wooden bench. "Say, kicking that boy of mine out of college was the best thing you ever did, prof. He's in the army now and a lieutenant already. Imagine that? I worked here for twenty-seven years and I'm only a sergeant. He joins up and in less than a year—he's got a bar."

Professor King nodded vacantly and seemed to be miles off. Sergeant Ames noticed this, shrugged and went back to his work. Twenty minutes passed. Professor King used the phone again. This time he got an answer. He hung up.

"It was my old black brief case, sergeant. Rather shabby, I'm afraid. Thank you for giving me so much of your time. Why, I've been here for over half an hour. It's nine-twenty. Good day."

HE WALKED out, turned east and plodded along, never varying his pace. Even his heart was beating normally, his breathing quite rhythmic, which was a bit odd for a man who had just committed murder.

King reached a residential section of the city, wound up on a rather dark and very quiet street. Without pause he turned into a path that led up to a large house. He rummaged in his pocket, took out a key and opened the door. He paused for a second or two and wiped a smear off the name plate beside the door. It read *William Welden.*

Inside the house, King walked methodically to a large study. There was a table lamp burning and he noticed that the rear window was wide open. The fact that a man lay on the floor with a bullet hole through his head, didn't seem to affect Professor King much. He stood beside the corpse and spoke to it, as though it had been alive and breathing. His voice was gently chiding.

"Now, Mr. Welden, you brought this upon yourself. You made me kill you. When I agreed to accept your money to finance my experiments, I did not realize there was a rider to the contract. That anything I invented belonged to you."

He nodded his head solemnly, stepped over the corpse and went to a desk a couple of feet away. A chair lay on its side behind that desk. Apparently Welden had been sitting in it when he died. The telephone was off its cradle and dangling from the cord.

Professor King quietly removed a pair of gloves from his pocket, donned them and replaced the phone. He kept talking all the while.

"I was extremely fortunate, as you know, Mr. Welden. I found the answer to a medication that will save thousands of lives. It belongs to mankind, but you meant to reap great profits by selling it. By cashing in on my work and your petty investment."

Professor King walked around the desk, bent and studied an air-conditioning vent near the floor. He drew

a screw driver out of his pocket and removed the grill plate.

Inside was a small but complicated apparatus with a six-shooter pistol pointed at an upward angle so that its bullet would smash anyone who sat behind the desk.

The apparatus consisted of a light ray machine. It had been all so easy. Professor King told the dead man about it. Told him how he'd been killed.

"If you can hear me, Mr. Welden—but of course you can't—I'd like to tell you how this happened. The gun is controlled by a ray of light. A photo-electric cell with its beam trained directly upon the receiver of your telephone. When the phone is removed, the beam is broken and the magnetic force holding the trigger back, is released. That's what made the gun go off—when I pretended to phone my house from the police station. You picked up the phone and—well, the rest you know."

King reached into the vent and turned the gun cylinder experimentally. Why, he could use this machine again as easily as not. He switched on the ray and knew it was centered on the telephone again. But he had to remove this and promptly, before someone came.

He was just about to begin dismantling the apparatus when he heard someone on the front porch. King gasped. His plans had not included the unannounced arrival of anyone. He seized the air vent grill, screwed it back into place and then hurried in the direction of the open window. Halfway across the room, he stepped on something that rolled and almost made him lose his balance.

He paused to pick it up and knew what the object was. The bullet which had gone all the way through Welden's skull. King dropped it into his pocket and started moving quickly toward the window.

Carefully he hoisted his bones over the sill and was halfway out when he heard a growl of rage and then a bullet burned past his ear. That lent considerable impetus to his escape. Half a minute later he had blended with the darkness and vanished.

He started to remove his gloves when he reached the street at the rear of Welden's place. Something pricked his finger and he looked down. There were tiny pieces of glass clinging to the glove. He shook these off and idly wondered where they came from. He was puzzled too about the identity of the man who had shot at him.

Despite all this, his plan had worked. Of course, he'd have to return to the house soon and remove the apparatus, but that could wait. The police of this small town would never look for anything like that.

Professor King walked briskly the rest of the way home. He rang the bell and his white-haired housekeeper let him in. She took his hat.

"You're very late tonight, professor. Bert ate his dinner and went out about an hour ago."

"Bert did?" King asked mildly. "That's youth for you—always impetuous. Well, I'm hungry."

He ate with good appetite and smiled a bit. All this business about a murderer getting a case of nerves, being unable to eat, was so much nonsense. He wished he could find an excuse to lecture on the subject some day, but of course a professor of chemistry wasn't expected to know much about that kind of psychology.

In his library, equipped with well filled pipe and a faded old smoking jacket, he prowled through thick volumes on fractional distillation and discovered that he could really concentrate on this difficult subject without thinking once of the man who lay dead half a mile away.

He paid no attention to the clamor of the door bell. That would be Bert, his son. As usual, he'd forgotten his keys. The housekeeper ambled down the hall and he heard her speak.

TDA

THEN Professor King really got a shock. The man who walked into his library was Detective Sergeant Toomey of the local police. No great shakes as a detective, this Toomey, but persistent and thorough. Toomey took off his hat.

"Professor, I think you'd better come down to headquarters with me. A little trouble."

Professor King was quite equal to the occasion. He knew nothing could possibly have gone wrong with his plans.

"Oh my goodness," he said. "All this just because of a cheap brief case?"

"I don't know anything about a brief case, professor," Toomey said, "but your son is locked up and charged with murder."

King's book dropped to the floor with a crash that he didn't even hear. All he could do was stare up at Toomey's six feet of bulk.

"Bert . . . murder?"

"That's it, prof. We got him cold too. Can't figure what got into the kid. He murdered Bill Welden—shot him right through the head. He ran out, but Patrolman Chalmers was on his beat and saw Bert streaking down the street. He followed him, lost him for a while and then picked up his trail. I'll say one thing. Bert gave up without a fight and he was armed."

"Armed? He didn't fight? . . . Sergeant—I don't know what to say. I—can't even think. I—would you mind if I remained here for a little while? My head—it's spinning so. I—I'll be down very soon."

"Sure, prof. No doubt the kid had a mighty good reason for knocking off the old— I mean Mr. Welden. Some people will want to hang a medal on him, but it's a serious business. Murder is murder."

After Sergeant Toomey left, Professor King sank back into the depths of his chair. He realized now just what had happened. Bert must have guessed that he intended to murder Welden and gone there either to scare Welden out of town or do the job himself. Bert—his own son—had fired that shot at the professor. Therefore, Bert's gun would show an empty slug.

Professor King got up and rushed to the second floor of his house. He pawed through his son's bureau drawers, found a brown-paper-covered box and opened it. That box had contained a gun—the replica of the weapon which Professor King used to kill Welden.

King hurried downstairs again, dipped a hand into his coat pocket and found the slug which had passed through Welden's head. That would cinch the case. He hastily removed his smoking jacket, donned the coat and forgot all about a hat. He began walking as fast as he could toward police headquarters.

Not for one instant did he doubt what he had to do. Welden's blood was on his head, not Bert's. Professor King walked into police headquarters, stepped up to the desk and addressed Sergeant Ames.

"Sergeant—free my son and lock me up. I killed Welden."

Ames gave a start and then he shook his head sorrowfully.

"It's no use, prof. You're a swell guy and all that, but it won't work. The kid has confessed. You can't sacrifice yourself for him."

"Where is Sergeant Toomey?" King asked. "I must see him—at once."

Ames pointed to a door down the hall. "You'll find him in there. Bert too, I think. He's getting ready to sign a confession."

PROFESSOR KING literally tore down the hall and burst into Sergeant Toomey's office. Bert was there, hunched in a chair and looking about twenty years older. His hair was disarrayed and he puffed nervously on a cigarette.

He jumped up when his father entered. "Toomey," he cried, "my father is going to say he killed Welden. I can tell by the look in his eyes. Hurry up with that confession and

let's get it over with. I killed him."

"Bert," Professor King said. "Bert—listen to me. You also, Sergeant Toomey. I killed Welden. He deserved it. My motive is quite beside the point."

Toomey frowned. "Now let's get this straight. For heaven's sake, gentlemen, remember this is murder. Only one man did the job. Professor, don't you think you'd better let Bert take his medicine? It won't mean the chair. No jury would convict him on a first-degree count. Bert told me what Welden did to you."

"Yes, of course. What he did to me, sergeant. Therefore, I had the greatest reason for killing him. I can outline every step if you wish. Sergeant Ames, on the desk, really helped me do it."

"Ames — helped you?" Toomey asked incredulously. He stepped out of the room and bellowed Ames' name. The desk sergeant hurried to the office.

"The prof says you helped him knock off Welden," Toomey said. "What's this all about?"

"Let me explain," King begged. "Of course, Sergeant Ames knows nothing about it. I came here about two hours ago and reported my brief case lost. I threw it into a rubbish can on Carmody Street. Near the corner of West Side Avenue. Send someone there and you'll see I'm telling the truth."

"What's that got to do with it?" Toomey demanded.

Bert King spoke up. "Dad, this thing is driving you out of your mind. That's a lot of nonsense. Come on, get this confession-typed and I'll sign it."

"No, Bert," Professor King said. "You're sacrificing yourself for me. I'm very grateful, but it just can't be. Sergeant Toomey—and you, Ames—I reported the brief case missing to fashion an alibi for myself. Medical examination will show that Welden died at approximately nine o'clock. That's when I phoned him. From your desk, Sergeant Ames."

"He phoned his own house," Ames told Toomey.

"Not the first time," King put in quietly. "I dialed Welden's home. I knew he was there, seated at his desk probably figuring out the profits he'd make from my work. When the phone rang, he reached for the instrument, broke the beam of a photo-electric cell and set the gun off. It couldn't miss. I knew exactly where Welden sat."

"Look," Sergeant Toomey said, "why don't you two get together and find out who knocked him off? I can't figure it out."

"Sergeant," Bert King said, rising, "one of your patrolmen saw me leave the house. Naturally I acted suspiciously and avoided him. He followed me and even though I tried to hide, he found me. He also found the gun in my possession. The one I used to shoot Welden with."

"That isn't so," Professor King exclaimed. "Bert slipped into the house and saw me leaving through a window. He probably thought I was Welden, running away. He shot at me and the bullet went straight through the open window."

"Well, that makes some sense," Toomey nodded. "We didn't find the slug and it wasn't in Weldon's skull. What else, professor?"

King made a feeble motion with his hand. "I can show you much better than I can explain. Why not take me to Welden's home? I'll prove, conclusively, that I did it. Toomey, you do believe me?"

Toomey tapped fingertips against the top of his desk. "Frankly, prof, I don't. Why? Because you're a professor of chemistry. If you wanted to rub out Welden, you could have done the job with drugs nobody could trace."

"That's exactly why I used a gun and my apparatus," King argued. "Very few poisons are untraceable and if one was used, suspicion would have fastened on me. I really meant to get away with this, you know."

"Yeah," Toomey grunted. "I'm be-

ginning to think you want to get away with something else, too. Nix—I don't believe a word of your story. Bert here was sore at Welden because of the dirty trick he pulled on you. He did the business, maybe he even figured you'd try it and wanted to beat you to it."

"Please," Professor King asked wearily, "won't you at least go to the house with me and see for yourself?"

"Don't do it," Bert broke in. "Sergeant, if you take me there, so help me, I'll try to get clear. Even if I have to bust you one right on the jaw. I won't go!"

"That," Toomey said, "does it."

He darted to Bert's side and a handcuff clicked around the young man's wrist. "I don't think you'll get away, Bert. Hey, Ames—I'm working overtime as usual, My wife will call. Have her phone Welden's house and I'll do the explaining. You know how women are."

"Sure," Ames agreed. "I hope you solve this thing. It won't look so good for us if two people confess to the same murder. Say, maybe I should send down and see if the prof really did put his brief case in that rubbish can. Won't take only a minute or two."

Sergeant Toomey nodded. He parked beside Bert King for they were handcuffed together. Toomey looked from one man to the other and decided both showed the worry that went with guilt.

Professor King really was worried—more so than at any time during his whole life. Here he was—a murderer, and no one believed him. The crime he'd committed blamed on his own son. Professor King began to understand that sometimes things boomerang. This one certainly had.

Ames came back in a few minutes. "Prof," he said, "it looks like you're talking through your hat. The rubbish can was checked—and no brief case."

"It could have been removed," King said. "People are always delving into rubbish cans. Some even make a living from it. I did throw the brief case there."

"Come on," Toomey said. "This is going to be a waste of time, but I'll take you men out to Welden's house. Have to sooner or later if both of you men insist on taking the rap."

A POLICE car, with a driver, took them to Welden's house. It was completely darkened. Toomey dragged Bert to the sidewalk and issued one more warning.

"Bert, I've known you since you were a kid and I'd hate to hurt you. All I ask is a promise that you won't try some fool stunt. Otherwise, the cuffs stay on—and if you make a break for it I'll shoot, so help me."

"Bert," Professor King said, "the sergeant is right. All this is so silly. You know I killed Welden and I can prove it. Why, then, make all this trouble?"

"I won't run away," Bert agreed.

Toomey removed the handcuffs and all three walked up to the front door. Toomey had a key and opened it. They stepped inside and proceeded straight to the study where Welden had been killed.

Toomey said, "Now I want one thing understood. Welden died precisely at nine o'clock. The bullet hit the crystal of his wrist watch before it smashed into his head. The hands of the watch stopped so we can set the time perfectly."

"It was nine when I shot him," Bert said. "I remember hearing the clock downtown strike the hour. I—didn't quite tell the whole truth, sergeant. There really is a lethal device hidden here. But my father had nothing to do with it."

Toomey sat down like a man very tired. "Look, make up your minds, will you? The professor mentioned that machine controlled by the telephone. Okay, if it's here then I'd say he was guilty. Now, Bert, you never mentioned any device at all until now. I can't figure out which one of you is shielding the other."

Bert King looked over at his father and shook his head slowly. He sat down, too.

"All right, sergeant, here is the whole truth. Every bit of it. Dad was going to kill Welden. I know all about it because I saw him constructing that machine of his. I couldn't let him do that, and the only way to stop him was for me to kill Welden myself. The lethal device went off when dad phoned, but Welden was already dead. I killed him a minute or so before. On my way out, I heard the gun explode."

"Bert," Professor King cried, "you're only trying to save me. I'm not worth it. My experiments are completed. I've done my job and what happens from here on is unimportant. Can't you see?"

"Prof," Toomey broke in, "let Bert talk. He makes sense."

Bert went on. "Naturally the sound of the shot frightened me. I ran outside and hid not far away because I had to return and get rid of that machine. There is nothing else to it."

"Then where is the bullet fired by the professor's gun?" Toomey asked. "I haven't even found the one your gun discharged."

"I don't know. If you look hard enough, you may find it," Bert said. "Bullets do strange things sometimes."

"Sit right where you are," Toomey ordered. "I'm going to have a good look around first."

He walked over to the desk at which Welden had been seated when he died. Toomey plumped himself into the chair. He opened drawers, studied papers and finally picked up a black-bound notebook from the top middle drawer. He glanced at this and gave a start of amazement.

"Hey, you two—listen. Welden must have written this just before he was killed. He knew somebody was gunning for him. Right here he says an ex-business partner of his got out of prison a few days ago, and Welden was afraid this man would come here and try to get revenge. I remember the case. The partner took the rap, but we always suspected Welden had framed it on him."

Professor King and his son looked at each other in open amazement.

Toomey went on. "Welden says here that if anything happens to him, look for this partner as the guilty man. Say, you two birds have been confessing to something maybe neither of you did."

"But my light ray . . ." Professor King began weakly.

"Even if it's there, I don't believe it did the job. Now, I've really got something to work on."

Professor King stepped close to his son. "Bert, perhaps Sergeant Toomey is right. Neither of us could have committed this crime."

Bert exhaled deeply. "Dad—you utter fool. Why did you even think of killing him? I knew the preparations you made."

Professor King said slowly, "I had to do it. Welden owned my secret. It never belonged to him—nor even to me. It was public property, for the neediest person to benefit from, but he had other ideas. He meant to control its supply and get the highest possible price. A man like that doesn't deserve to live."

Toomey walked over to them. "Now the truth is coming out, huh? Good—and believe me, I'm glad neither of you killed him. Maybe he did deserve it, but no matter—murder is always punished. Sometimes the killer gets away, but from then on he lives a terrible life. Sometimes mitigating circumstances prescribe a mild punishment. He goes to prison for a short time, but he always serves a penal term within himself that lasts as long as he lives. A man can't escape it."

Professor King nodded. "You're right, of course. I'd hate to live like that."

BERT KING wandered over to the desk and sat down. He picked up the notebook in which Welden had

written. Suddenly the phone jangled. Toomey moved toward it.

"That'll be my wife, I suppose."

Bert, engrossed in the notebook, automatically reached for the telephone. Professor King gave a wild yell, hurled himself forward and got between the phone and Bert.

In accomplishing this, Professor King hit his son's arm. The telephone was pushed to one side. There was an explosion. The sound of a horrible impact—of steel against bone. Professor King sagged on top of the desk, slid off it and fell to the floor.

Five minutes later, Toomey had the lethal apparatus disconnected. Bert King sat rigidly, looking at his father's corpse. Toomey used the phone for a few moments, hung up and faced Bert.

"The man Welden accused of plotting to murder him never did the job, Bert. He was re-arrested a day after he got out of prison and has been locked up ever since. I—don't know quite what to think now."

"He's dead," Bert said slowly. "He knew that gun would fire and he sacrificed himself to save me. I—guess he knew all the time that he really had killed Welden."

"Then he was telling the truth?" Toomey asked.

"He was. As you said, it would have been difficult for him to live in peace. Dad possessed a conscience. Possibly it hadn't found time to work on him yet, but eventually he'd have given way to it. I fired the shot out of my gun at him. At my own father. I believed it was Welden trying to get away from me. You see, I told him I'd be over for a showdown."

Toomey grimaced. "If we could only prove it, Bert. People are bound to say you did the job and both of us conspired to throw the blame on a dead man."

Bert got up slowly, walked over and knelt beside his father. Professor King's right hand was outthrust, the fingers tightly clenched as if he held onto something. Bert opened those fingers gently and a battered bullet rolled onto the bare floor.

Toomey picked it up. "Blood on it, Bert. Welden's blood. If your story is straight, I can prove this slug came out of the gun your father hid in that ventilator. Proof enough, but I hate to hang this on him."

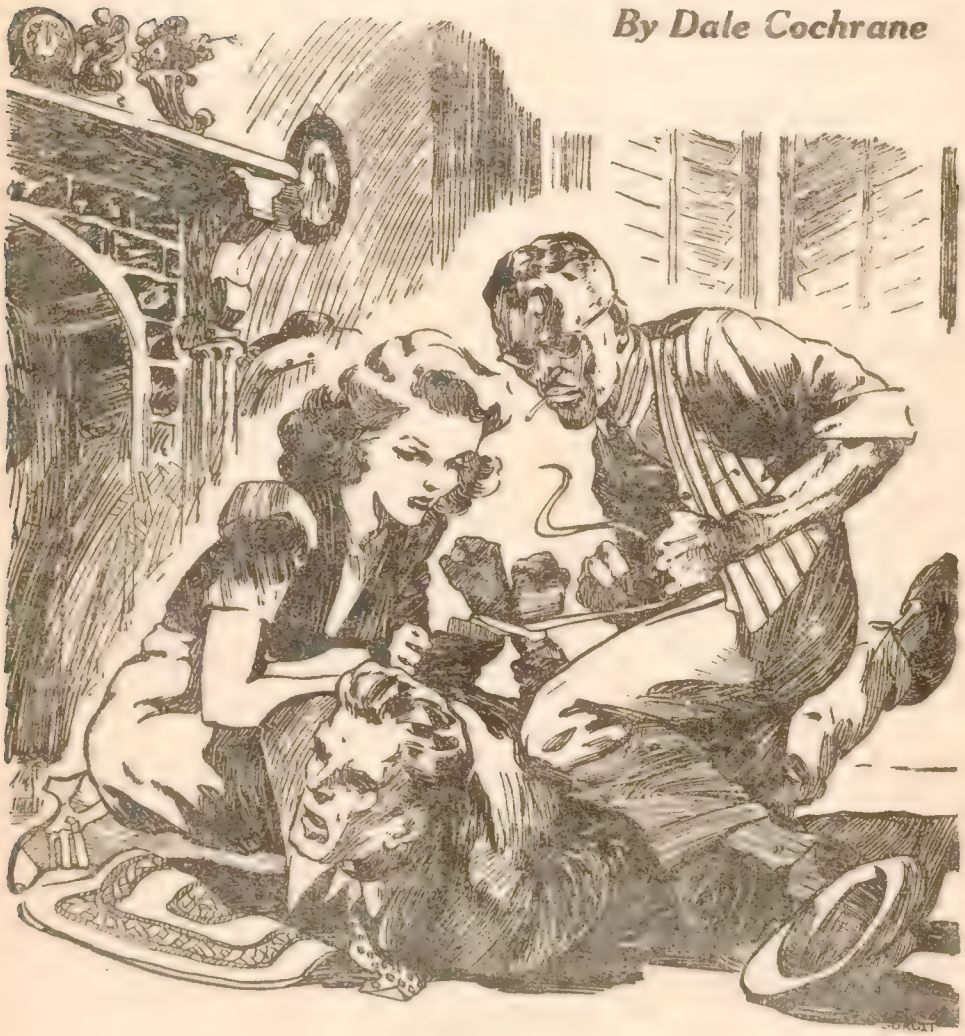
"He wouldn't mind," Bert said softly. "Dad wasn't really a killer, sergeant. He simply felt that he had to do this. It was as much a part of his way of things as discovering the medicine which Welden mean to keep from being generally used."

"I know," Toomey said. "He was a nice old guy. Kindly sort and he killed Welden, not for his own gain, but to protect a lot of people who would have been deprived of his medicine. He proved what kind of a man he was when he gave up his life to save you. There is no doubt of his guilt. Look at that gloved hand. Little pieces of glass—certainly from Welden's wrist watch crystal, sticking to the fingers."

*Private Detective Jessup, reduced to manhunting with a camera lens' lines up a shooting target under . . . .*

# The Magic Eye

*By Dale Cochrane*



YOU'VE heard it said that human nature never changes. I mean, just one person's nature and the way he acts. I'm not talking about myself now. I know I've got the reputation as the dumbest dick in seven states, and that I wouldn't know my own nose in front of my face if it wasn't tacked on there—but we'll let that slide. The fellow I'm talking about now is Pal Haven. Pal Haven the bookie. Pal used to be such a good guy. And now—

"Hey, Stupid!"

I looked up from where I was sit-

ting in a side booth at Carney's Bar, and it was Pal. Pal didn't have his usual, ever-present little scratch pad in the palm of his hand, like bookies always have. He looked down sourly at me.

I didn't like that "Stupid" coming from Pal. I could take it from others, and I did often enough. But Pal was my buddy, my best friend. Pal was the one who always had faith in me, who thought my opinions were little shiny things with 14K stamped on them.

But that was changed. Pal was bitter now. I could understand that. I could understand why he had disregarded my urgent advice to him that he lay low, that he put himself out of the way somewhere where nobody could find him—after that last attempt on his life. And who wouldn't be bitter after serving an eighteen-month stretch in the pen for something you didn't do? Pal claimed it was a case of mistaken identity. But nobody could mistake Pal.

"This tailing after me, Stupid," Pal said. "This following after me like a horse-tick wherever I go. Lay off. I'm getting a little tired. I'm going to get tough."

Pal turned away quick, like maybe he didn't want me to see the expression on his face. Pal had a trimmed moustache and wore glasses. His shoulders didn't have any room to spare in his coat. He had a shiny smile that used to be friendly. It squeezed me dry inside to see the change. I caught Pal's sport-coat sleeve as he turned.

"Some people can take hard knocks," I said, "and bounce right back. Don't let these things get you down, Pal. Now look at me—"

He jerked loose. "I am looking at you." But he wasn't. He was giving me the wintry shoulder. "I'm telling you that anything that ever was between us is finished. Why, you're not even a dick anymore, Fat-face. Just a two-bit street photographer."

He said it contemptuously, cold, hard, like a knife, meant to wound. I touched the camera hanging on my chest with a neckstrap, and I felt a hot flush rise to my scalp. I know why Pal was saying these cruel things. He was insulting me, trying to get rid of me. It must be that he was afraid I'd get hurt if I was friendly with him.

Sure, that was it! That was why I'd hardly glimpsed Pal, had a word with him in the past month. He'd been giving me the extra quick-and-snappy brushoff every time I'd almost catch up with him, ducking whenever he saw me first.

I swallowed hard. "I haven't given up flatfooting yet, Pal," I said grimly. "I'm going to see you cleared. Why, I'm working on some new stuff now. I'm—"

I started to get enthusiastic, but I might just as well have been talking to thin air. Pal had moved on away. Of course, what I was just saying was a damn lie. Every clerk in Tiffany's had identified Pal as the gyp-artist who had swindled them out of a $30,000 pearl-and-diamond necklace. It was something that nothing could alter now.

A woman came in the bar, and I saw Pal go over and talk to her. He moved her aside. They talked in low whispers and I couldn't hear what they said. My view was blocked too, now, and it was shadowy in Carney's, so I couldn't see what the woman was like. A couple times I noticed Pal raise his hand to his right ear, as if he were fingering the shaving nick I'd noticed he had there. Then the woman went away.

On my way out I went past the spot where she had stood. A delicate fragrance was still in the air. I whiffed it. "Chanel Number 5," I said to myself, tagging it. Then I stepped out through the door.

Pal had just left too. I caught his glance, as he looked back, at the sound of my footsteps behind him. I thought for an instant he was going to grin at me, and my heart warmed.

He'd be just like the Pal of old—if he grinned. I snapped his picture. Just then his grin turned to a dark scowl, as he recognized me. I thought he was going to bust my camera.

I felt weak and funny-like as I backed away—backed away from Pal! "I didn't do nothing," I said. "I didn't take no picture. I—"

Pal swung away and walked off, ignoring my apology.

Pal sure had gone sour.

THE big, long limousine that was black enough to be a hearse pulled up along the curb on Fifty-seventh Street, near where I was snapping action shots of passers-by. You know, the kind you send in a quarter and the little card for. Two men stepped out of the car, and I noticed it was chauffeur-driven. They came over to me.

"Are you Stupid Jessup?"

"Stew Jessup," I corrected, eyeing them haughtily. Either one of them could have outflanked Gargantua in a beauty contest.

"You come with us." And they began to muscle me toward their car.

I pulled loose from them, as I remembered something. It was just such an outfit that had nabbed Pal Haven and dumped him off the Queensboro Bridge with an anvil around his neck. That was the attempt on his life, after which I advised him to lay low. They might not make the mistake of tying the anvil on with a slip knot the second time. Pal had said, "It was a big, black car—longer than a midnight yawn."

"I don't wanna play," I said, and I brushed their hands off me.

But my two little friends were kittenish. One of them rammed a smoke-pole in my back, and the other crowded close up to me with his shoulder under my jaw and his flattened beak massaging mine.

I unwound, and I don't weigh two hundred forty for nothing, even if I do go around sometimes smelling flowers or writing poetry. My knuckled fist hit Gargantua I on his Red Cross pressure point. I stamped down hard with my size sixteen brogan on Gargantua II behind me and he let out a yell and grabbed for his shin. I proceeded with my operations according to plan and bounced the back of my hand off his ear.

"Grrr!" I said, feeling ferocious, and then. *"Whoosh!"*

While I wasn't looking I got tripped and I fell on my face, only what is sometimes rancorously referred to as my corporation hit the pavement first. Gargantua I came at me, bending over, and I put my shoeprint on his face, just to see what it would look like.

I was up then. I acted like I had the ball, and there was ten seconds to play for old Alma Mammy. One of the monkeys was in the way, and I guess I upset him and used him as a carpet. Head down, and clutching my camera to me, I streaked for the goalposts, a path clearing on each side for me.

Then I hit what seemed to me to be a fence. I got all tangled up in it and then I was falling. The ground gave way under me, and a big, dark and unhandsome void opened up to swallow me. . . .

"HELLO, what's this?" I said, turning my head dizzily and batting open my eyes. I was vaguely aware that a lot of time had skipped over the dam. Then I gagged on something, and I wrinkled my nose. *"Phe-ew!* What a smell!"

It was smelling salts. The two gorillas were standing over me, and I was lying on a couch in what looked like the library of a very swanky mansion.

"It was a manhole," Gargantua with the busted beak explained. "They had a protecting little fence around it, but you crashed right through."

"You mean I fell in a manhole?" I sat up, and I discovered I didn't feel so bad. My camera was still

dangling on my chest from its neck-strap.

"*You* fall in a manhole?" The gorilla quaked a laugh. He looked at my girth. "You flatter yourself. We had us a time—like pulling a tight cork out of a bottle."

I began to get mad then. I began to feel like committing murder and assorted mayhem. I wanted to know what it was all about. I—

A man came into the room and I broke off. For that man brought along with him a hush that said he was master of this thing.

"Detective Jessup, I presume," he said in a low, even tone that made me feel a little larger than life size. "Won't you step in my office a moment?" And he nodded to the double doors behind him.

I hesitated. I looked at those double doors and I wondered what was behind him. "Who are you?" I said. "I don't know you! And if it's business—I'm not accustomed to transacting business while two zoo-hoodlums are twisting my arms behind my back!"

The man looked at me, then at the two gorillas. His expression did not change. "You'll please excuse them, on my behalf," he said to me, "if they were unnecessarily rough. I merely told them they were to bring you to me. Perhaps I should have mentioned that they were to avoid unpleasantness in bringing you." He paused, for just the right effect. "I am John Powers Steele."

I gulped. "*Who-o-o?*"

His face didn't change expression in the slightest. "Yes, I am *the* John Powers Steele—and I need your help."

Cripes! He might just as well have said he was John Rockefeller Jr., or J. P. Morgan. John Powers Steele was head of the American Metals interests, and one of the biggest names in the country—and he said he needed my help!

I smartened up and clicked my heels. My heart was going biddy-bump, biddy-bump. "Detective Stew Jessup at your service, sir," I said.

And I was thinking, oh boy, here's where we eat again. Then Steele stuck a pin in my bubble and let all the air out.

"I am hiring you as a photographer," he said. "Not as a detective."

He began a chatter about an article about American Metals that was being contemplated for that big dollar magazine they call "Wealth." No, he had never been photographed before; he didn't believe in it. But now he thought—

John Powers Steele suddenly broke off his line of chatter and held a warning finger of silence to his tightly drawn lips. He had bustled me into the next room and closed the double doors behind us, and now we were alone.

He nodded back toward where the two gorillas would still be in the other room, and apparently he saw the chagrin on my face.

He didn't smile. "Of course, that little spiel," he said, "was for the benefit of my two bodyguards. I have a secret mission for you. A mission that will tax all your resources and skill."

"As—as a detective?" I asked hopefully.

"As a detective," he said.

He moved on in the shadowy room toward a desk that covered about ten acres and was illuminated brightly by one of these new-fangled fluorescent lamps. He turned to me to motion me to a seat—and then I saw *it*.

IT WAS a mask. His face was, I mean. It was funny I hadn't noticed it till then; I was so excited, I guess. But then, on the other hand, it was such a beautifully executed piece of craftsmanship, perhaps it wasn't so surprising I hadn't known. John Powers Steele didn't have a face. John Powers Steele had a mask—a mask that seemed made

of some coral-colored plastic instead of a face! He saw me staring.

"My face intrigues you?" he said. "You didn't know?"

I did know. "I read about it in the papers sometime," I said. "But I guess I didn't pay it much attention. I remember it was something about hot steel splashing on you in an accident years ago while you were visiting one of your foundries."

The great industrialist's eyes glowed out from pits in the mask like ugly fires. "It was no accident," he said evenly. "It was a vicious attempt against my life by a workman who was jealous of the efficiency and order with which I do things. I guess you have heard me called cold, hard, ruthless—many other things. I guess—"

He broke off with a chuckle and a wave of his hands. "But why talk about that? That has little to do with the momentous business for which I've summoned you here, Detective Jessup. I've summoned you here because I feel that you're one man I can trust and rely upon above all others—and this is a task upon which the future of America itself may depend!"

He paused for breath, but his eyes held me like a frozen robin. That coral-plastic mask of his was unreal, weird. It floated above his shoulders like an expressionless apparition. There were holes in the mask for the eyes, the nostrils, the mouth. I could see the faint line where the mask left off and his head began just in front of his ears. I wondered what was under that mask. Only the gruesome relic of a face, I'd read in the papers. . . .

"Are you ready to undertake the assignment?"

His question sort of jerked me alert. I'd been fumblingly, carelessly working the gadgets on my camera for a moment.

"Eh—what's that?" I said. And then the echo of what he'd said filtered through to me and made sense. "Assignment? Sure, I'll take it. That is—what was that again you said?"

I was making about as much sense as a schoolboy reciting Latin. But could I help it if the itch to do things with my camera had got the better of my attention for a moment?

The mask stared at me, still unchanging. It gave me the creeps, not knowing what expression his face—if he had a face—was having. He opened a drawer, took out something. It made a heavy sound when he put it down.

"You'll need this," he said.

I shook my head. "I have a gun."

"Take this one anyway." And his word was a command. He held something else out to me—five of them. "You'll be able to use these," he said.

"Yes, sir!"

They were one-thousand-dollar bills!

I DIDN'T get around to Carney's until late the following night. I had just finished my assignment for John Powers Steele. It had kept me pretty busy. I usually never miss my evening beer, but I had missed the preceding night. I was prepared to make up for lost time. It was a hot evening, with the tar bubbles burping up on the asphalt of Seventh Avenue outside.

"A mint julep, Jack," I said to the barkeep. "And I'm in no hurry for it. Fix it up nice so the glass is all pretty and ice-frosted on the outside. And make things with the mint so it smells good."

Jack leered at me.

"Since when?" he said.

"Since when—what?"

"Since when do you go in for fancy drinks? I got you nine bucks seventy on the cuff right now. The gov'ment don't like that. It ain't good for the Defense. But I'll shut my eyes, like a good bloke, and let you run the ticket up to ten bucks

even. What'll it be now—a reg'lar? Beer?"

I waved the green stuff in front of his eyes. "Take a look," I said. "But don't take a hold. It's money."

It was money. A thousand dollars worth to the skin.

But Jack laughed. "Phonies," he said. "The pitchmen sell 'em two fer a nickel on Fourteenth Street. They—"

Suddenly Jack made a grab for the edge of the bar like he was going to keel over. "Silk threads," he choked. "Red and green ones. It's real! Hey, you robbed a bank?" He backed off suddenly, like he was scared.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"That's why the cops was in here today then!" He clapped the flat palm of his hand to the side of his face. "They was looking for you! Holy Nellie, that's why a gumshoe is parked across the street keepin' a lookout on this place right now!"

I got up from my seat. I squinted outside. "I don't see no cop." But I was feeling a little sickish. I looked appealingly to Jack. "Pal Haven—has he been around?"

Jack said, "He ain't been around since you was in here and saw him yesterday."

A man moved out from behind a parked car across the street. He was big and broad, and from his swagger he was unmistakably a flatfoot. I don't know what it is, but cops always scare me, even when I haven't done anything wrong. Or had I?

I said to Jack, "I think I'd like to use your washroom."

But I didn't go back to the washroom. I went back through the kitchen, past the phone booth and the potato chip cans and out into the area-way behind. I climbed a wall and sort of toppled, wheezing, onto the other side.

From an adjoining screen door, I smelled hot pastrami and I went inside. I was in a delicatessen. The clerk was ladling out some sour cream to customers and he didn't notice me as I went by and out onto the Avenue.

I walked up the Avenue and looked back over my shoulder. I grinned. The flatfoot who was after me was just disappearing into Carney's. Then I turned my head back, and I wasn't grinning any more. I was up against a stone wall. A stone wall in the person of two dark-shirted coppers who had just stepped from a patrol car at the curb.

"Don't you know better than to leave your engine running?" I quipped. "Wastes gas."

"You're wastin' gas yourself," said the bigger of them.

"We want you," said the other, and his hand put the bite on my arm.

"Want me—for what?" I said.

They both chorused it. "For the murder of John Powers Steele."

IT TOOK a couple seconds for it to hit me. Then my knees wobbled. "Come again?" I said.

"We don't know where the body is," said the first cop, "but it's murder anyway."

He dug his hands in my pocket and brought out a gun—the one Steele had given me when he hired me. "Ah-hah!" he said, and he wrapped the gat carefully in a handkerchief like he had something. Then he dug out the five one-thousand-dollar bills. "Ah-hah!" he said again, licking his lips.

This thing had me scared. "Ah-hah, yourself," I snapped, and reached to take back the money. "It's mine. I earned it."

"I'll say you did," said the cop. "You helped your buddy Pal Haven clean out all the liquid assets of American Metals. Last night you toted off all the negotiable securities he had arranged to have salted away in a safe at the American

Metals' office. And there was plenty cash too."

The other copper looked at me hard and raised a lumpy fist to my schnozzola. "Now what did you do with Steele's body? As if you didn't know Pal Haven's been wearing Steele's mask. That he's been posing as his uncle, John Powers Steele, for I don't know how long—converting Steele's assets into cash and negotiable stuff that he could cart away."

"His uncle?" I gulped.

"As if you didn't know!" he said again. "What did you think you were doing last night—when you got into the American Metals Building after hours, conked the company guards, and made off with almost a million dollars—playing parcheesi?"

The first copper laughed, and his laugh was ugly.

"Company guards!" I gasped. Then: "Why, you must be stiff! Pie-eyed drunk, the two of you. If those gents were company guards would they have jumped their own boss—J.P.?"

"Because it wasn't J.P.," said the cop. "You were stashed outside the offices as lookout while your buddy went in to work on the safe. The guards had already let your buddy through, thinking it was J.P. himself. Then one of the guards happened back where your buddy was working at the safe. Your buddy was having trouble getting it open—and it was a hot night. He took off his mask for a second—the sweat may have affected his skin and eyes—and the guard saw—"

I felt sick. How could I tell these cops what I thought? How could I tell them I thought I was working for National Defense? That the men I helped slug were foreign agents, thick in a plot to make off with all that dough if we didn't get to it first? That's what J.P. Steele—if it was Steele—told me.

"O-o-hh!" I groaned, bending over.

THE coppers bent over too, to try to make out what suddenly happened to me. I couldn't let Pal Haven take the rap for this—and that was what they were framing him for. Maybe they were right—it wasn't J.P. But it wasn't P.H. either. Pal Haven was swell—the best buddy a guy ever had, and as innocent of doing anything crooked as peach-fuzz.

I brought my head up, suddenlike. I hit somebody's jaw, and the crack sounded like a French .75. I swiveled, and my leaping fist contacted the enemy's midsection. I felt a grab at my collar, and I lunged like a horse on an up-hill pull.

The coat ripped neatly off my back, and I left it behind as a souvenir as I headed for parts remote—which in this case was Central Park. A couple bullets whizzed over my head, but then they called the shooting off. There were too many innocent bystanders in danger of getting hit. But that didn't stop the coppers from blowing their whistles as if they wanted every flatfoot in Bronx, Brooklyn and Pitkin Avenue to hear it too.

I could feel the law converging on me from all sides. I saw a park sign that said: *To Zoo and Carousel.* I got as far as the zoo before I realized that was a mistake. They had me hemstitched in, and I had no place to hide.

I looked over at some dark blobs in an open-topped cage. They were bison. I hoisted up and climbed over and dropped into the animal yard. I walked up quietly and told the bison to move over.

They welcomed me as a frat brother and I became another dark blob as the search surged around me. Nice, peaceful bison!

But I couldn't stay there long, I know. I had to get to Pal Haven and warn him. The man I knew as John Powers Steele was, it seemed, no more Pal Haven than I am Christoforo Columbo. Pal Haven had

staked me to beans and a bed when I was down and out. Pal Haven had stuck by me and believed in me when I bungled a couple cases and everybody was laughing at me. They couldn't tell me Pal Haven would do anything mean and low. I had to do my darndest to help Pal.

I must have lain in the animal yard a couple hours. I smelled like the Western prairie when I left it. I went down to where I live on Morton Street. There was a cop staked out opposite my building. I went on down to Hudson Street and into a building there. It was about two in the morning. I rang all the bells on the bell board. I didn't have to wait long and someone buzzed the door open for me.

I went inside and on through the house to the garden at the rear. I heard someone call, sleepily: "Who's there?" But I didn't pay it no mind.

I did a little fence climbing and I was mighty tuckered by the time I got up behind my building. I saw a figure move in the garden. But it was only old Mrs. Bauer, my insomniac landlady, taking the night air on her hammock.

"I forgot my key," I said.

She believed it for a moment, then she gave me a sharp stare. "Since when does Detective Jessup need keys? Always you're opening up for me the doors of the tenants without keys." She didn't have an accent, but she got her word orders decked out in a style that was becomingly her own.

"Ha, ha," I said as if the joke were on me. "You're right."

And I went on in the building and up the tortuous stairs to my room. My camera was there. I took it and went into the closet that I had fitted up as a dark room. I turned on the red safety bulb. In fifteen minutes I had my pictures developed. There were just two of them I was interested in. The one I took of Pal Haven in front of Carney's Bar, and the one I took of John Powers Steele when he was explaining the assignment he had for me.

I took the two still dripping-wet prints out and looked at them under the light. I remembered that Pal Haven had had a razor nick on his right ear, which he had been fingering when he spoke to the woman who had met him in the bar. I compared Pal's ear with Steele's, and my heart plummeted.

HAVE you ever heard that failing fingerprints, the next best way to identify people is by the varied configurations of their ears? Well, Pal's and Steele's ears were identical, even to the razor nick! I couldn't believe it; those two guys couldn't be the same. Yet here the evidence was before me in sepia and white! The magic eye of a camera does not deceive.

I found myself a new coat to replace the one that had been ripped off my back. I turned off the light in my room. I went down and out into the garden.

"Hot night," I said to Mrs. Bauer. "Don't you ever sleep?"

I went right ahead and climbed the fence. As I perched on top of it, puffing, she said, "I suppose the key you have forgotten it again?"

"Yes," I said, smiling sweetly, and I dropped out of sight on the other side.

But I wasn't feeling all sweetness and light. I couldn't figure how Pal fit in this setup, and for that matter I wouldn't know how I figured unless I found Pal. And how would I find Pal with the police looking for me? And anyway, if Pal had tucked nigh onto a million bucks for himself, would he be hanging around town? But Pal couldn't be just a plain criminal like that. Or could he?

I spent a tough night searching for trace of Pal and by next morning I needed a beer bad. So I headed for Carney's. I got within a block

of the place and I remembered what had happened to me the last time I was there. Cops would likely be staked around looking for me. I stopped on the corner, trying to make up my mind what to do, and then a woman passed me and something hit my delicate nostrils. It was a whiff that hit those olfactory gadgets of mine. A perfume whiff that I tabbed as Chanel No. 5.

Now there are probably no fewer than fifty thousand fraus in New York who dab No. 5 behind their ears, but being near Carney's, something told me this dame had just come from there; that maybe she had just dropped in for a drink and that she was the same bustle who had been in there the other night talking to Pal.

I heeled about. "This gal will lead me to Pal," I said to myself.

I tracked her through the crowded streets to Forty-eighth Street. Then she disappeared from view. Except that she hadn't disappeared. She had turned into a little shop that bore the sign: "Theatrical Makeup & Supplies." I flattened close to the window and I heard her say to the clerk: "I'd like a small bottle of spirit gum."

After that she went on down to the five-and-dime and for a quarter bought a transformation—a switch of hair.

It was getting pretty hot and by the time I had ambled after her to a furnished-room building on Central Park South, I had twice had the feeling that the boys in blue had specked me and were coming after.

She went up into the building, and I followed. On the third floor she stopped before a door and knocked twice. Then she took a ring of keys from her bag and began to key her way into the room. I was right up behind her close, and my breath hissed in her ear.

"Inside, sis."

I didn't have to tell her my pet Colt was nuzzling her spinal bumps.

She choked back a little cry and stumbled forward. I saw Pal Haven start up from a messy-looking day studio on which he had been reclining. I thought he was going to throw a chair at me. Then he saw the gun.

I didn't like to hold a gun on Pal; he was my friend. My best friend.

"Pal," I said, "do I have to do this to you? What's happened? What kinda mess is this?"

He didn't say anything for seconds. Then a slow grin spread on his lips.

"You're not guilty of anything, are you, Pal?" I said reassuringly. "You can explain everything, can't you?"

"Sure," he said, coming toward me. "You can put away the heater."

I started to lower my gun. I looked over toward the girl to see how she was acting. Then lightning struck. It hit me on the point of the jaw and I knew it wasn't lightning. I was on the floor, feeling numb, and I knew it was Pal's fist that hit me. I was coming out of the daze I was in and I felt Pal and the girl tying and trussing me up with neckties, leather belts, and whatever else they could find.

Pal muttered one word under his breath, *"Stupid!"* It carried to me like a slap in the face.

EVERYTHING happened quick after that, and I knew I was sunk. How could I make Pal understand that I was only trying to help him? That he was being a damn fool, running away.

And he was going to run away. He took the spirit gum and the switch of hair the girl brought him and began to fashion himself a beard, sticking the hair on with the fast-drying, liquid spirit gum.

A rap on the door sounded sharply. Pal grabbed up my gun and another gun. The room's door snapped open, and a cop stood there. I saw

Pal squeezing trigger, and I kicked out. Tied as I was, I missed, but my glancing blow was enough to deflect the shot. Then the window near the fire-escape crashed and bluecoats were pouring in from there.

Pal swiveled to shoot. I saw the answer coming, and I moved to save Pal, but I was too late. Pal crouched over on the floor, holding his bullet-riddled middle, as cops struggled with the kicking, screaming girl.

"Good work, Stew," I heard Lieutenant Frost's voice. "You led us right to him."

I was so shaken I didn't make out much sense of what was going on. I guess Pal wasn't shot so bad that he'd die, but those stomach wounds hurt, and he thought he was a goner. Maybe he was, too.

And the police Looie told him: "Listen, you're going out. Do you want to meet your Maker this way? Talk and get it off your chest."

Pal talked, and talked fast. He confessed everything, and cleared me.

"Stupid," he said, "he was—just a sucker. Don't—hurt—the fat slob."

The ambulance came around after a while, and I was watching them cart off what there was left of Pal. I guess maybe those things coming down out of my eyes were tears. Was I dumb! Was I *Stupid!*

And then I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned around. It was Pal. Only it couldn't be Pal. They were *clang-dinging* Pal away in that ambulance. And, hey, how could Pal be wearing another suit so soon?

His eyes danced behind his spectacles. He said, "That was good advice, Stew, telling me to lay low. Only I got tired laying low. I been away over a month now, then I heard you was in trouble and I followed back and tracked you to here."

I moaned. I gasped. Then I guessed I earned that dern-busted name they all call me. But I didn't care.

"Pal," I said. "Was you ever sent up to take a rap in a case of mistaken identity? Pal, did fifty clerks in Tiffany's once say it was you who robbed them of a thirty-grand hunk of jewelry—and it wasn't you?"

Pal looked at me, innocent-like. "Yeah," he said. "But let's forget that. It's something we can never straighten out now."

I chortled. "Pal, just you wait and see what this little detec-a-tif is going to do for you." I chortled some more. "Pal, you are going to be cleared!"

And I told him—the guy who had pulled the jewel job was the one who'd killed John Powers Steele. He'd tied me into his plans because I was the buddy of Pal Haven, who the killer looked like.

So in case any of you saw two grown guys skipping up Central Park South, arm in arm, one day not so long ago—they weren't soused.

It was me and Pal.

# Bury Me Alive

*By Quentin Hall*

*Old Judd, wise in the ways of the farmland, gives two city killers a lesson in country manners—and rural retribution.*

JUDD felt his ancient bones groan and creak as he stooped to dig a tomato out of the soft dark earth. It was firm and green between his gnarled old fingers, but the smile that it brought became a tight-lipped grimace as dull pain thrust along his spine when he straightened.

"Gettin' old," he thought. "Too old for farmin'."

Lanny was over the hill on the upper section, working like mad under the glaring, merciless sun to reap their harvest before the court term opened in two days. Thinking of his son, of the broad, muscled youth who would carry on his name, filled Judd's chest with a warm glow.

His watery blue eyes, bordered by an interlacing web of creases, caught movement over at the small neat frame house. He made a shade with his palm and watched the two men pick their way toward him along the furrowed ground.

They had the stamp of the north on them, city men. Judd could tell from the exaggerated cut of their clothes and the swagger in their walk. He had seen the type back in town during the winter season, strutting like bantam roosters. Then, as they came closer their faces focused in a piecemeal clarity, and he knew suddenly that these men were quite different from those he'd seen, and a faint uneasiness bloomed inside of him.

"Hello," he said. "Looking to buy some tomatoes?"

The tall one laughed, a staccato hacking noise that seemed to lack all trace of mirth.

"Not exactly, friend, not exactly."

Both strangers wore slacks knifed down the center, and contrasting odd coats, cut tight around the waist and flaring wide in the skirt. The tall one had a hollow, narrow-jawed face and shining black hair brushed flat against his skull. The other was short, but extraordinarily thick through chest and shoulders, with a hard impassive face and dark unreadable eyes. He said in a toneless voice:

"This the Judd farm?"

Judd considered a denial and immediately realized the futility of it because they had probably already seen the name on the R. F. D. mail box out on the road.

"Why, yes."

"Then you must be his old man?"

Judd blinked and waited.

"Where's the boy?" the squat man asked.

"What boy?'

The tall one took a menacing step forward and snarled: "You know damn well who we mean. Spill it or—"

"Shut up, Yager! I'll handle this."

Yager fell back, a scowl pulling the ends of his lips. He folded his arms and watched the squat man move up to within a single pace of old Judd.

"Where's your boy? Where's Lanny Judd?" the emotionless voice asked.

Sweat was beading Judd's upper lip and stood out on the bony bulges of his temples.

"W-what do you want him for?" He asked the question even though he knew in his heart what the answer was.

FIVE thick spatulate fingers jumped out at him and hooked around the front of his moist blue denim workshirt. He felt himself jarred close to the squat man's face, looking into the dark opaque eyes.

"I want to see him, that's all. Where is he?"

Judd was thinking fast. "Lanny went to town with the truck. He took a load in to the packer."

"When's he comin' back?"

The old man opened his mouth and wet his lips and gulped several times.

The tall man said: "Slug him, Paley. He'll talk up fast enough."

Paley twisted his paw, tourniqueting Judd's shirt around his sparse frame. "When's the boy comin' back?" he repeated.

" 'Bout an hour," Judd told him.

Paley released his grip. "Okay, pop, let's go back to the house and wait."

They filed along the narrow path between long rows of tomatoes; Yager in the lead, old Judd in the middle, and Paley's solid bulk bringing up the rear.

The living room was small and barely furnished with a few odd pieces, but it had the warmth of living in it, and daylight streaming through the curtainless windows spread a golden glow around the things Judd knew so well. There hadn't been curtains on the windows for a long time now, not since Martha had passed away. Little by little, through the years, all the feminine touched had seeped out of the house like rainwater into the hungry earth.

Judd sat on a hard-backed rocker, his bony fingers clasped tightly together, his thin seamed lips tucked inward, and his bleary troubled eyes roaming feverishly between the two men who were waiting with a sort of calm, implacable patience.

Yager stood propped against the mantelpiece. From an inside pocket he'd produced a pint flask which he carefully applied to his mouth at sporadic intervals. A slow flush had crept along his throat to fill the caves around his hollow jaws.

Paley had selected the most comfortable chair in the room, but he was sitting on its edge, a cigarette pasted against the corner of his mouth, a thin tendril of smoke drifting upward from the long ash to fan out around his head and cause the dark eyes to squint against its bite. He was intent upon what he was doing.

His broad left palm fondled an ugly blue-black automatic while he methodically ran his silk display handkerchief along its short barrel, imparting a dull sheen to the tooled steel. Three times he had removed the clip, jacked out the cartridges, examined them carefully and returned the clip into position.

Once he had moved the chair he was sitting in so that it faced the door squarely. Watching him, Judd had felt the blood mounting in pressure against his temples. Finally he said in a hoarse voice:

"Listen, you, listen, what are you goin' to do with Lanny?"

The squat man opened his eyes and

lifted the brows above them. He looked up from his work.

"What do you think?"

"You ain't goin' to kill him!" Judd's voice rose in an angry wail. "You ain't!"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Yager. "Go ahead, Paley. Give it to him now. He'll only be in our way."

Paley shook his head. "Later. Keep quiet, old man."

Judd gnawed on his bottom lip. "Listen," he insisted, "listen, it wasn't Lanny's fault he seen them men come out of the bank. He didn't want to get mixed up in no court cases. The county prosecutor came out here and asked him to testify. He's only doin' what he's been told."

Yager hacked out a short laugh.

"He's the state's star witness," Paley said quietly. "We can't let our friends swing for cracking a tin box in a hick town."

"But they killed a man," Judd muttered.

"He had it coming to him. He should have been smart enough to keep his hands in the air instead of setting off the alarm."

Judd considered that, flexing his numb hands. He was remembering Lanny's excitement that afternoon upon returning home after the robbery. . . .

LANNY had been nursing the ancient Ford truck along Main Street, and had come to a point diagonally opposite the Farmer's National when it happened. From inside the bank a huge bell started clattering like a frightened hen. Immediately two shots rang out and in a moment it seemed all hell had broken loose.

Two men sprinted into the street, tearing dark masks from their faces. One of them carried a gun in each hand; the other held a sawed-off Tommy in the crook of his arm. In the brief space of time before they lunged into a sedan waiting for them at the curb, Lanny had seen their faces. Then with an angry engine grind, the sedan had jumped away from the curb and was speeding down the street to disappear in a cloud of exhaust.

They would have gotten away with it too, except for the accident three miles down the road when they'd rammed into the rear of a gasoline truck and wrecked their car. They'd taken to the swamps and held out for three days, but not knowing the country they'd been duck soup for the sheriff's posse.

Judd said: "But Lanny wasn't the only one who seen those men. You can't go killin' everybody."

"Oh, can't we?" Paley inquired softly. "There's only Mrs. Upshur. She comes as soon as we can fix the boy, tonight, probably."

Judd thought of stout, good-natured Mrs. Upshur, whose husband operated the dairy farm, and of her three little girls, skinny kids with serious faces and pigtails and neat starched dresses.

He looked over at the gilt clock on the mantlepiece and heard its steady tick-tock and saw the filigreed hands scissoring time away. Lanny would be returning to the house soon. Judd saw that Paley had ceased polishing his automatic and was resting it against his knee, ready for instant use. He could imagine the shocked look in Lanny's face when he came abreast of the doorway, and something inside old Judd wrenched at his heart.

He opened his mouth and cackled hoarsely, the sound jerking Yager's head around in an attitude of surprised attention. Yager stared at him wide-eyed and gave another hacking cough. "What the hell!" he breathed.

Paley took the cigaret out of his mouth and ground it slowly against the sole of his shoe, watching Judd through slitted eyes. And again the old man shook with a sort of triumphant laughter.

The squat man unhinged himself from the chair and crossed over to Judd and pulled him upright.

"What's so funny, pop? What's the joke?"

Judd shook his head and swallowed.

Paley ground the gunsight into his chest until a thin line of crimson trickled from the torn skin. "C'mon, pop," he coaxed, "I like a joke as well as the next man. What are you laughing at? What's the joke?"

Judd became sober. "You'll have a long wait here for Lanny. The prosecutor's puttin' him in protective custody until after the trial. He's stayin' in town from now on."

Paley watched him for a moment and a grim smile spread his lips thin. "Sorry, pop, it's no go. We know for a fact that the prosecutor let the boy come back to the farm to harvest the crop. Help is scarce and you couldn't get anybody else to do it. He's here now, and we're not waiting for him. Let's go out and find him, pop. Let's watch him dig tomatoes."

Judd shook his head. "No," he said stubbornly.

Paley chopped with the gun barrel.

Judd spilled over backward and rolled over once and looked up into the cold, emotionless face staring down.

"Lead the way, pop," Paley said.

JUDD blinked and whimpered and stumbled out to the porch. They made a strange picture, walking across the south pasture, the two city men flanking Judd on each side.

They passed silently through a clump of trees and across a weed-filled meadow that was soft and moist underfoot. Yager cursed softly as his shoes slogged through the mud.

"How far?" Paley demanded.

"He's workin' the new section we bought last year," Judd told him. "This is a short cut."

"Do we have to go through that?" Yager asked petulantly, pointing to a border of tangled undergrowth.

Judd looked up eagerly. "No. We can walk along the main road, if you like."

"This is good enough."

They advanced a hundred feet and now Paley gave voice to an obscenity. Beneath their feet the earth had grown marshy. It sucked at Yager's two-tone shoes with soggy noises. Paley's heavier weight shoved him in to his ankles.

"We're runnin' an irrigation ditch through here," old Judd explained. "Just a couple of yards more."

He stumbled once and fell on his hands, burying them elbow-deep in the mud and greenish moss. Yager's longer steps had taken him some paces in advance. Suddenly he stopped and floundered helplessly, twisting around.

He said, "Paley, Paley," in a stricken, dumb voice, and began to circle his arms frantically.

Slowly, before Judd's eyes, Yager started to sink. He was almost to his knees in the swamp now and a few wild efforts to bring him clear were immediately futile.

The squat man did not go to his help. He started to twist around, but the marsh was pulling at his own feet and he could not move. Judd felt the implacable suction himself. He stood there with the slime oozing up toward his thighs, and crossed his arms over his chest.

For the first time, Paley's eyes took on expression. Fear. Stark, brain-numbing fear. He put the automatic into his hand and threatened old Judd with it.

"Get us out of this!" he mouthed. "Get us out of this, or I'll blow you to shreds!"

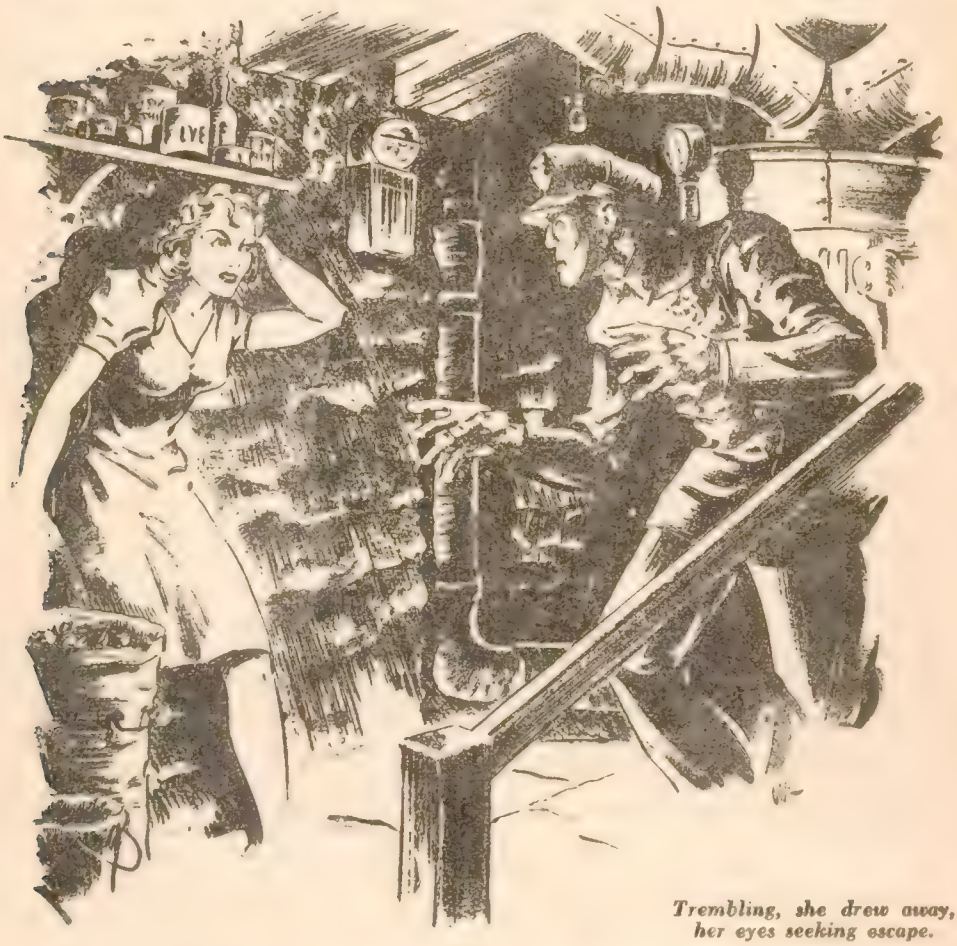
Judd shook his head calmly. A kind of odd serenity had softened the wrinkles around his face. He was an old man. He had lived his life, but Lanny was young and entitled to a chance at his. And Mrs. Upshur, too, had a right to watch her three girls grow up. He was smiling now.

"Quicksand," he said. "Can't even get myself out."

Paley's gun roared twice and the smile froze on old Judd's face. The two men from up North were screaming.

Overhead a buzzard banked and wheeled, flapping its wings.

# A Little White Lye




*Trembling, she drew away, her eyes seeking escape.*

## *By Fredric Brown*

★ ★ ★

***In that strange house, filled with the aftermath of murder, another horrible crime performance was scheduled. And though Ginny had the homicide program before her, she couldn't tell when the curtain would go up—and if the Grim Reaper was the star.***

★ ★ ★

IF ANYONE had told her that the events of that day, which started with such bright hopes and anticipation, would lead to an incredible, horror-filled climax, she would have thought him crazy. But not for long. Death rattles too loud to be misunderstood.

Dirk had come into their hotel room that morning with excitement shining in his dark eyes. "Angel," he told her, "I've found one. Four rooms and bath, and a big yard. In fact, it's nearly out in the country."

"How much, Dirk?"

"Too good to be true, Angel. Three thousand, and a couple of hundred down will get it for us. Come on and give your okay so we can grab it before the agent finds out he's being gypped!"

And Ginny kissed him and said, "Oh, Dirk," and it seemed that just about the only trouble-cloud on her horizon had been blown away by his words. *If*, of course, she liked the house.

Dirk's car was being fixed at the garage, and they took the bus line out. The agent, Dirk told her, was to meet them there.

Ginny held thumbs, figuratively, all the way out, hoping she'd like it. A hotel is fine for a honeymoon, she thought, but it gets awful once you're back and want a place of your own. They'd been back a week now from their brief but ecstatic trip. Brief because Dirk had wanted to save his money for a down payment on a place of their own. The honeymoon had been as brief and ecstatic as the courtship that had preceded it.

It seemed almost impossible to believe that she'd known Dirk only a month. It seemed impossible to believe that so much had happened in four short weeks.

Then they were off the bus, and walking, and after a few blocks Dirk said, "That's it, Angel!"

It *was* a nice house, or seemed to be from the outside. A bit lonely with the nearest other residence a full block away and screened by trees. But that didn't matter much.

There was a little picket fence around the front yard, and the lawn was in excellent condition. The house had green shutters and plenty of windows.

An almost too friendly agent met them on the porch and showed them through. Ginny's eyes brightened as she planned just what furniture she would need to put in each room.

The agent seemed to be ignoring Dirk; he concentrated on Ginny as though Dirk was already in the bag, and he did a shrewd job of selling her. They came, finally, to the kitchen. This was the agent's hole card, this was the clincher.

It had windows over the sink, low windows, the kind that swing open. It had a nook for a refrigerator, and cabinets. Cabinets enough for anybody.

Ginny looked around once more, and took a deep breath. It *did* seem impossible that a place like this would go for such a price. She looked fearfully at the agent, wondering if Dirk could have misunderstood. She asked, "And —how much?"

"Three thousand, Madam. And excellent terms, of course—"

They'd seen places for five thousand, even six, that were worse.

THE agent was hemming and hawing now. He said, "It's only fair, of course, to tell you—" He cleared his throat again. "Uh—you'll remember that it has an unfortunate history. That is the reason it's being sold so reasonably. The former tenant rented it, and—uh—you've heard about it, undoubtedly."

Ginny didn't seem to have anything to say at the moment, and Dirk said, "I don't believe we understand. What happened here?"

"The—uh—the newspapers called it the Love Nest Murder, Mr. Rogers. Undoubtedly you read about it, just a few months ago."

"I think I remember the headlines," said Dirk. "I never read that kind of story unless—— You say it happened right here?"

The agent nodded, his eyes troubled. He said, "I never met Mr. Cartwright, the—murderer. I was working for another agency then. But I've read about the case. And I can assure you that the bathtub you just saw is a brand new one."

"The bathtub?" repeated Ginny, a bit blankly. And then suddenly, "*I* remember now, reading about it. After he strangled her, he tried to—he put

her in the bathtub and filled it with lye—"

Dirk shuddered a little.

He said, "The Love Nest Murder. It sounds—ugh!"

There was a curiously stubborn look on Ginny's oval face. She said, "Dirk, let's take it."

There was a strange twist to Dirk's lips. He said again, "The Love Nest Murder. Angel, I wish they'd *named* it something else. But I suppose we can forget about it. If you say so, we'll take it."

And they did. They moved in just five days later, and in the chaos of buying as much furniture as they could—on the installment plan—they almost succeeded in forgetting about "it."

But there were neighbors, even though they were a block away. They were neighborly neighbors, and Ginny got to know them. She told Dirk at dinner one evening: "That Mrs. Platt in the next house—the widow—told me all about this house today."

Dirk merely grunted, and Ginny looked at him suspiciously. "Aren't you interested?"

He shook his head. "Look," he said, "we're here, but the less we think about whatever happened—"

"Sissy," Ginny interrupted. Then her face became serious. "I think it's wrong to—to ignore it. To think about 'whatever' happened, instead of knowing the whole thing. It's the *un*known that gets people down. Just thinking of it as the Love Nest Murder instead of—"

"Don't," said Dirk, putting down his knife and fork, "use that awful phrase. All right, go ahead and tell me about it and get it off your mind."

"Well," Ginny began, "this woman was very wealthy. At least, that's what everybody thought. Wealthy and a bit eccentric because she didn't believe in keeping whatever money she had in banks and people said she hid it. She was thirty-six."

Dirk grunted. "Trust the neighbors to know that."

"Why shouldn't they know it? The marriage license applications in the papers show people's ages, don't they? And this Cartwright man was younger, and handsome in a way, and—"

"And he married her for her money," Dirk supplied wearily.

Ginny nodded. "And then he tired of her, I suppose, or maybe he couldn't *get* her money, so he strangled her and put her in—"

"You told me about that part," Dirk said quickly.

"But her bones wouldn't dissolve," Ginny went on. "And he hadn't even finished getting rid of—uh—the rest of her, when some of her friends got suspicious and—called the police."

"What made them suspicious?"

Ginny said, "I don't know exactly. But he got scared, and got away in time. When the police came they found—they found the mess in the bathtub."

"Well," Dirk said. "Now I know. Now let's not talk about it any more." He picked up his knife and fork, and then put them down again.

"This Cartwright," Ginny said ominously, "hasn't been caught—yet."

"He will be," Dirk said. He looked at Ginny thoughtfully. "Do you really feel better now that you've talked about all the sorry details?"

Ginny's lower lip was trembling. "I thought, maybe, I would; maybe if I said it all out loud, I could forget it." There was moisture, suddenly, in her eyes. "Oh, Dirk—"

Swiftly, he rose and came around the table. Tenderly he tilted her chin and kissed her. "Now *quit* thinking about it," he said. "Or bargain or no bargain, we move out of here quick."

Ginny wiped her eyes with an absurdly little handkerchief. She said, "All right, Dirk. But honestly, I'm *not* sorry we bought it. But—I'll feel better when that man is caught."

"And don't let that Mrs. Pratt next door talk to you about it. You—you just tell anybody that wants to talk to you about it that *you* don't."

GINNY nodded dutifully. Of course Dirk was right. He'd been right all along and she'd been a dumb-bunny to think the way to forget something was to talk about it. She felt so humble she didn't even correct him on his mispronouncement of Mrs. Platt's name. And that was quite something for Ginny, because she loved to correct people who made mistakes.

That had been Tuesday, at dinner, and it had spoiled the dinner.

There'd been a bad moment Tuesday night, around midnight. Ginny, who was usually a very heavy sleeper, chanced to wake up then. She rolled over—and found she was alone in the bed. Dirk was gone.

For an instant she was startled, then she remembered that Dirk often got up around that time to raid the icebox. He was a restless sleeper, and seldom slept soundly for more than an hour or two at a stretch.

She listened for sounds that would indicate that he was out there—the scrape of a chair or the opening or closing of the icebox door. Or—

But the sound she heard was a muffled tapping. It kept on a moment and then changed tone, as though Dirk—if it *was* Dirk—had quit tapping on something and started tapping on something else.

*Tap—tap—tap. Tap—tap—tap.* Not a familiar sound. It wasn't the noise Dirk's pipe made being knocked out, because that was a succession of more rapid taps. Faster, and sharper.

Wide awake now, and a bit afraid without knowing what she was afraid of, Ginny slid her feet out of bed and into the slippers on the floor beside it. She slipped a bathrobe ever her shoulders and went through the bedroom door, which led into the dining room.

Yes, the kitchen light was on. The kitchen door squeaked when she opened it, and Dirk, standing in front of the built-in cabinet over the sink, looked over his shoulder and then turned.

His voice was casual. "Did I wake you, Angel?"

"N-no. I just woke up. But what was that funny tapping noise?"

Dirk grinned a bit shamefacedly. "I imagined something. It looked to me as though this cupboard wasn't as deep on one side as on the other, and I just got curious. But I was wrong."

Ginny said, "Oh," a bit blankly. What if the cupboard *were* deeper on one side than the other?

"Something to eat, now that you're up?" Dirk asked. "I was just getting the crackers out of the cupboard, and there's some swell cheese. Just the thing for a little mouse like you."

She *was* hungry, a little. Neither of them had eaten much dinner, she remembered now, because— But no, don't think of what they'd been talking about, she told herself, or it would spoil her appetite now, too.

And Dirk, with a sharp knife in his hand, but smiling, was already slicing the cheese. . . .

She didn't see the widow until late afternoon of the next day, when she walked by on the way to the grocery. The widow was working at the flowerbed just inside the fence, and Ginny said, "Hello, Mrs. Platt."

"Pratt," corrected the widow, smiling. "How are you, my dear?"

"I'm fine," Ginny told her. "Sorry I got your name wrong. And my husband had it right, then. I didn't know he'd met you."

"He hasn't," said Mrs. Pratt. "These zinnias are going to be beautiful here, I think. No, I've seen your husband only at a distance, when he's driven by. You must bring him over sometime."

"I will," Ginny told her. "But I wonder how he knew your name, when I told it to him wrong. I—" And then realizing that, by implication, she sounded as though she were doubting Dirk and Mrs. Pratt both, she said quickly, "Yes, zinnias will go nicely there. What have you planted in that other bed, back by the porch?"

"Gladioli. But about your husband—I'll bet the agent he bought the house from talked about me to him. I rent

from him, too. And he probably said, 'Mr. Rogers, you want to be careful of that awful widow, Mrs. Pratt, who lives in the next house.' "

Ginny laughed heartily at the very thought of anyone saying that. But undoubtedly it was—in a way—the explanation. The agent had brought Dirk here first, and had talked to Dirk alone. He might easily have mentioned the name of the nearest neighbor, since he knew her.

Mrs. Pratt was taking off the cotton gloves she'd been wearing. She said, "Well, that's enough gardening for today. Will you have a cup of tea with me?"

"I really haven't time—" said Ginny hesitantly. But she did.

SHE wasn't, of course, going to talk about "it." That is, she thought she wasn't, until all of a sudden there was the subject, big as life, being talked about. And Ginny listening with both ears.

"My dear," Mrs. Pratt asked her. "Have you *searched* the place since you lived there? The police did, of course, and they didn't find anything, but I've often wondered—"

"Searched it?" Ginny wanted to know. "For what?"

"Why, for the *money*, of course. Everybody says it was hidden there, somewhere, and nobody knows whether *he* got it or not. He left in an awful hurry, you know, after—after he found the police were coming."

Ginny said hesitantly, "But he—he wouldn't have killed her, would he, unless he knew that he could get the money?"

Mrs. Pratt shrugged complacently. "Don't forget, my dear, he tried to dispose of the body. If he'd succeeded, he could have had time to take the house apart, practically, afterwards. I'd say he knew it was in the house all right, but he *may* not have found it."

"You say the police searched, though?" Ginny asked. (Why, Dirk had known about this and hadn't told her. That was why he had been searching in the kitchen last night. That was why she'd seen him wandering about the house so much, and with that curious, inquisitive expression on his face. Why hadn't Dirk told her?)

"Oh, they went through the place," said Mrs. Pratt, her manner clearly indicating that she didn't think much of either the police or their methods. "But I think they sort of assumed *he* had it already."

"Oh," said Ginny, feeling vaguely uneasy at the mere possibility of money, big money, being hidden in the house over there. It seemed almost worse, more dangerous, than—than the other. That was past. Maybe the money was *still there*.

She said, "But if he didn't get it, wouldn't he have come back while the house was empty?"

Mrs. Pratt shrugged again. "He might have, of course, but if he did, it was taking an awful chance. He's *wanted* now, for murder. And all the while it was empty, the policemen on the beat kept an eye on it, and squad cars went by. And I told the police if I ever saw a light there at night, I'd phone them."

"And there was no sign that he ever came back?"

"Nary a sign," said Mrs. Pratt. "What *I* think is that he ran far when he ran. That he's *miles* away from here and will stay away until it's all blown over, and then someday when he thinks it's safe he'll— Oh, I shouldn't say this, my dear."

Ginny found that her lips were tightly pressed together. She relaxed them with an effort and forced herself to smile. She said, "I'm afraid you've already said it. And I won't lie to you, I am a bit frightened. But I won't let it scare me out. It's our house now, and I'm going to live there no matter what."

"Does your husband have a revolver?"

"Yes," said Ginny. Dirk didn't have one, but she made up her mind then and there that he would buy one the next day, so she might as well answer

in the affirmative now, hadn't she? (Oh, Dirk, you should have thought of that yourself. You knew about the possibility of the money being there, or you wouldn't have been hunting for it. Why didn't you tell me, Dirk?)

Mrs. Pratt said, "And if I were you, I'd be very, very careful about agents, and vacuum cleaner salesmen and people like that. You know he was an actor, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't," said Ginny, faintly.

"Well, he was. He could probably disguise himself so you wouldn't know him at all. I wouldn't let anybody in the house, unless he was short and fat, maybe. Even an actor couldn't do that with makeup."

"He was tall and thin, then?" Ginny asked.

"Not really tall," said Mrs. Pratt. "But an inch or two above average. Five foot eleven, about. Slender, but not thin. You have a telephone, of course, haven't you?"

"Of course," said Ginny, and then resolutely changed the subject, and, ten minutes later, got away.

It was too late now to go to the grocery after all, and Dirk would have to be satisfied with eating something that was already in the house. But Dirk was good about such things, he seldom complained.

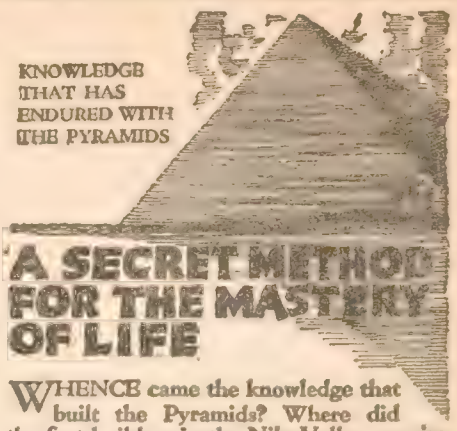
(Oh, Dirk dearest, were you trying to spare my feelings, by not telling me what you were searching for? *I'd rather know. I'd rather know the worst, any day.*)

DIRK was sitting in the Morris chair, reading, when she came in. Had he been sitting there all along, or had he been searching again, while she was out, and run for the chair and the book when he heard her coming?

He said, "Hi, Angel. What's for grub?"

"Dirk, I'm so sorry. I didn't get to the store at all. Mrs. Pratt asked me in for a cup of tea and we talked so much I looked up at the clock and—"

"Ummm-hmmm," Dirk drawled. "Baked beans, I suppose."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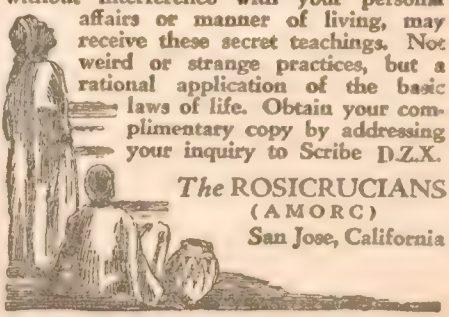


*The* ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)
San Jose, California

"No, I can make a salad except that it won't have any celery in it, and we've got some boiled ham left, enough for a sandwich apiece."

"Swell," said Dirk. "A loaf of bread, a slice of ham, and thou, beside me sitting in the wilderness—"

"Dirk, do you—don't you think it would be a good idea for you to get a revolver? Tomorrow?"

"Why—I've been arranging to get one, Angel." He looked at her, and the laughter was out of his eyes. "Matter of fact, I'm going to get it this evening, from a friend of mine who has a spare one."

He put the book down on the arm of the chair, shutting it without marking his place. "Have you been talking to this widow-woman about—you know what?"

"N-no," said Ginny.

Dirk smiled, surprisingly, and said, "Tsk, tsk. Never stutter when you tell a lie. But I'm glad to know you're not a good liar, Angel. First time you ever tried it, and it sticks out like a sore thumb. Now I can trust you."

He reached out and caught her wrist, pulled her into his lap and kissed her soundly.

(And this, Ginny thought, is the time I should take him to task for lying to *me*. About the cupboard last night and— But he didn't really lie, did he? No, he just didn't tell all the truth, and that's not quite as bad. But—oh, Dirk, can't we be frank with one another?)

But she didn't say any of it. Dirk had stopped kissing her and his voice was very serious.

He said, "Ginny"—and it was seldom he called her that instead of Angel—"you *do* know the whole story about this house now. That Mrs. Pratt told you. Are you still sure you want to live here?"

"Yes," said Ginny, and again a bit fiercely, "*yes*. It's our house, Dirk, *ours!* If we'd rented it, it might be different. But we're going to stay here, forever."

And she jumped up from his lap and ran out into the kitchen to get supper ready for them.

It was getting dark out, and she turned on the kitchen light and scurried about, getting the salad put together.

Dirk was an awful dear not to complain when she treated him like this, and from now on she'd keep things on hand so he could have a real meal, even if she didn't have time to go to the store.

When they had eaten, Dirk yawned and stood up. He said, "Well, Angel, guess I'll pop over to see Walter Mills and get that pistol. He's letting me have it for ten bucks."

"Could—could you teach me how to shoot?"

"Why not? We can set up a little range in the basement. I'd like a spot of practice myself. I'll take the car and be back in—oh, an hour and a half at most."

Ginny washed the dishes and straightened up the kitchen as soon as he'd left, and that still gave her an hour to wait before he'd return. Or maybe he'd be later than he said, if he stopped to talk. Who was this Walter Mills? She hadn't heard his name mentioned before.

She went into the living room and sat down in the Morris chair. It was becoming Dirk's favorite chair, and she'd resolved to sit in it only when he wasn't there. Giving it up to him when he *was* there gave her a comfortable feeling of being a dutiful wife. After all, a man should have a chair all his own.

The book—a mystery novel—was still on the arm where Dirk had left it. She opened it to the first page and tried to read, but found that the words didn't mean anything to her.

She sighed, put the book down again, and let herself think.

*Was* there money hidden in the house? If so, it wasn't hers or Dirk's, and it wouldn't do them any good to find it, because they'd have to turn it over to the police, so why was Dirk so interested?

But wait—it *would* do good to find it.

Of course—*that* was why Dirk was hunting for it! There wouldn't be any danger, then. They'd give it to the police, and be sure that the story got in the papers, all the papers. And *that man* would read it, and he'd know the money wasn't here and there wouldn't be any reason for his coming back, ever.

Of course! The end of danger, the end of worry and fear, if the money was found. (Dirk, now I understand. You knew that, but you didn't talk about it because you didn't want to scare me about the danger while the money might still be here.)

BUT where would it be hidden? Could she find it, where the police and Dirk had failed? Well, she had one edge on them; she was a woman, and the money had been hidden by a woman. She said, "Let's see, let's pretend I've got some money *I* want to hide."

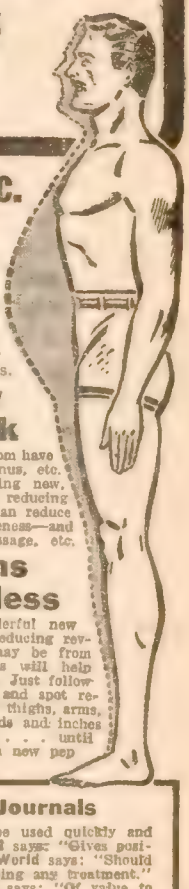
And she closed her eyes. A compartment in a cupboard, or something built into a wall? No, because I'd have to have someone build it for me and then I wouldn't be the only one who knew. *I* can't use tools, so probably poor Mrs. Cartwright couldn't.

But I wouldn't just put it in a drawer. I wouldn't put it in a mattress or anything like that because that's where somebody would look first. I think I'd hide it down in the cellar somewhere. I don't know just why, but a cellar seems somehow *permanent*. There seems more security in something hidden in a cellar, doesn't there?

Ginny got up out of the Morris chair and went through the kitchen to the head of the stairs leading down to the basement, and turned on the lights down there. And slowly, thoughtfully, went down the steep steps, looking around.

In or around the furnace? Oh, no, there's *heat* there. I wouldn't want my money to burn or to char from heat. Well away from the furnace.


REDUCE FAT



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Those dusty shelves? There were some old cans standing on them, things left there that hadn't been thrown out yet. In one of these cans, maybe? No, *I* wouldn't put it there, she thought. Because a can might get thrown out by mistake when I wasn't around.

But just the same, Ginny went over and looked at the shelf. There was a paint can, with the lid stuck on so tightly that she couldn't get it off, and it wouldn't be in there anyway. There was a little paint sloshing around in it, and *she* wouldn't put money in a messy paint can anyway.

The next can had some nails in it, rusty second-hand nails that had been salvaged and saved.

The next can—why, that was a new one! Dirk must have put it there. The label was turned the other way, and in idle curiosity she picked it up. The lid was loose and fell off as she took it down off the shelf.

And then, with horrid fascination, she was staring into the white powder that filled the can three-fourths of the way up, and she knew somehow what it was even before she turned it around to read the label. *Lye.*

What on earth had Dirk been doing with lye?

And then, because it was important that she have an answer to that at once, she stood there until she found it. Of course—he'd been here alone the second day, while she'd been downtown buying curtains. And he'd cleaned out the basement here with a hose.

And he must have had trouble with the drain, and got some lye from the store and fixed it. Of course.

*Of course.*

And he hadn't mentioned it to her, because of the horrible connotation that *lye* had, in that house they lived in. Probably he'd intended to throw out the rest of it, and that was why he hadn't bothered to put the lid on tightly again.

Her hand shook a little as she put the can back on the shelf.

*And besides, it would take more than one can of lye to—*

But she caught herself up quickly before her mind could complete that hideous thought.

(Dirk, why don't you hurry? Come back quickly, my dear, so I won't think the things I'm thinking. So I won't keep remembering now that I've known you only a month, and that I've never known much about your affairs, and that *you* found this house and brought me to it. And that you knew better when I called Mrs. Pratt by the wrong name, and that you've avoided meeting her, and that the agent you bought the house from hadn't known *him.*

(And, oh Dirk that you're slender and within half an inch of being five feet eleven, and that you didn't mention buying lye, and you didn't tell me why you were searching the house.

(Come back quickly, Dirk, so I can *look* at you and know how silly all of that is.)

That was part of Ginny's mind, and the rest of it was frantically following her eyes around the cellar, looking for a hiding place for money, a hiding place a woman might have used, that she, Ginny, would use.

Concentrate on that, to keep from thinking about the other.

The meter box, there on the wall. Why not? It was metal, and it had a permanent look, and it was something a man wouldn't think about because it belonged to the electric company and not to the house, and it had a hinged front. *If* inside it, there was a place where—

Ginny crossed to the box and opened it, and the money, of course, wasn't there. A silly place, come to think of it; any meter reader might find it there.

But between the box and the wall? It didn't look flush on one side, room even for the tips of Ginny's fingers to reach in. They touched paper, but couldn't pull it out.

UP HIGHER, and she found the top corner of whatever it was, pushed down gently, and it came out. A dirty white envelope, with something in it. And the something proved to be banknotes, about twenty or twenty-five of them, new, and in denominations Ginny had never seen before.

And then suddenly she was aware that she was alone in the house, and with fingers that trembled she pushed the envelope back where it had been and hurried up the stairs to the living room.

The clock showed her she'd been down there longer than she'd thought. It was time for Dirk to be back. (Oh, Dirk, please hurry. Why, of all nights, did you stay to talk to your friend?)

Maybe she could see his car coming now. Quickly she crossed over to the window that opened off the hall, the window that showed the vista toward town, the direction Dirk had gone.

Up there past the first corner, opposite that patch of trees, there was a car parked at the curb. Half a block past Mrs. Pratt's place. Odd that a car should stand there; there wasn't a house within half a block of it. And it looked like Dirk's car.

But it couldn't be. Why would he have parked it there?

Moonlight shone brightly on the front of the car, but the back end of it was in the shadow of the trees. At that distance, almost any black sedan, she told herself, would look like Dirk's. But—

Dirk's field glasses! She ran and got them, and peered at the car through them. Yes, it was Dirk's car.

And Ginny, feeling cold all over, knew the terrible truth. Not the details yet. But the main point. Her wild guesses hadn't been so wild. Dirk was —*the man!* The murderer. It all fitted now, almost.

And there was only one thing to do. Feeling as though she were commanding somebody else's body instead of her own, Ginny walked—she couldn't run—to the telephone. She'd have to


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call the police, tell them she'd found the money and—to hurry.

The receiver to her ear, she jiggled the hook nervously, waiting for the "Number, please," that would let her ask for the police, quickly. But the "Number, please," didn't come, and it came to her slowly that there wasn't the familiar buzzing sound of a live telephone connection.

He'd cut the phone wire.

Stunned, Ginny sat there by the phone for seconds before the hand holding the receiver dropped from her ear, and the receiver itself clattered to the floor.

The noise it made frightened her. It reminded her that she was utterly alone. Or was she?

Alone—*or worse.*

Because she heard the footsteps now on the walk outside. Heavy footsteps of someone who made no effort to walk silently.

Coming here. There wasn't any house beyond this. Coming here. For the money? For her? For—

The footsteps turned in at the walk, came up the wooden steps and resounded across the wooden porch, and the doorbell rang.

Should she run, out the back door and across the back yard, across the field behind it, *run*—?

But her feet were taking her, instead, to the side window of the porch, whence she could see without being seen. She peered through the curtain, and then sobbing with relief ran to open the door.

It wasn't Dirk. It was a policeman, and never before had she been so glad to see a blue uniform.

He took off his hat a bit awkwardly and said, "You're Mrs. Rogers? The chief told me to stop in. Is your husband—"

She didn't let him finish. *"I've found the money!* The money Mrs.—Mrs. Cartwright hid." And, in breathless haste, her words were tumbling over one another in their eagerness to get it out, because now she was safe.

". . . down cellar. Come on and I'll show you, and then—you can go with me to headquarters and we can turn it in, and—"

Her heels clicked down the cellar stairs, and heavier footsteps followed and the envelope with the money in it was in her hand and she gave it to him. And caught her breath—and lost it.

Because the man in the uniform looked less and less like a policeman as she stared at him. He was just under six feet tall, and he'd looked heavy, but she could see now in the light that that was because the shoulders of his coat were thickly padded.

HE STOOD there right under the light, looking into the envelope with greedy eyes, and she could see that there was makeup on his face. He stuffed the envelope into his pocket and turned to her.

Ginny screamed, because there was murder in his eyes.

There was a service revolver holstered at his belt, but he didn't reach for it. His hands were reaching for her throat, and he was between her and the stairway.

She backed away, and he came on. In a moment now, she'd be backed into a corner and it would be over with. She backed away, and then she couldn't back any farther because something was against her shoulder blades.

The shelf. And with desperate hope, her hand closed around the can. The lye.

His hands were almost on her throat when she threw it, can and all, with the white powder flaring out of the open can, into his face. Into his eyes.

And it was his turn to scream, then, a scream of agony as he backed away. Too blinded with pain now to think of anything else, and unresisting as Ginny's trembling hands got the gun from his holster. . . .

Dawn was different. She was sitting beside Dirk's bed in the hospital, and he was conscious now, and even

cheerful, although he was careful how he moved his head.

His story had been told now. On his way back from Walter's house, and a block and a half from home, a policeman had waved him to the curb. He'd obeyed and the "policeman" had come up and slugged him with a blackjack before he could even raise a hand to defend himself.

And Ginny and the police finished the story, for him, from there. Dirk had been shoved down out of sight in the back of the car and Cartwright had come on to the house. Probably his original intention had been to overcome Ginny and tie her up, then have a full night to search the place at his leisure. He'd known that the house, unoccupied, had been watched. But he'd waited his first opportunity once they'd moved in and the police surveillance was lessened. . . .

"But, Angel," Dirk said, wincing as he moved his head to look up at her again, "I know you did swell, and you're a heroine and I was a washout. But aren't you getting your story confused? You said once that you knew right away he wasn't really a policeman and you figured your only chance was down there—where you could get at the lye while he was opening the envelope. And then something about being so glad to see him that——"

Ginny put her fingers across his lips. "Doctor said you mustn't talk so much, Dirk."

Yes, she realized, she *had* got a bit mixed up in telling it. But there was one part Dirk must never, never know. She must never let him know what she suspected and then actually thought, during those awful moments before the killer came. She'd have to get her story straight, so he'd never catch her out on that.

"Of course I knew right away, Dirk. I mean, when I went to the door. But first I looked out the window, and I didn't know then and that was when I thought he was a real policeman and

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As long as our supply lasts you may obtain one of these handsome simulated diamond rings for only $1. The stone is flashingly brilliant, approximately 1-carat size and is set in the HEAVY "prosperity" mounting. Choice 14-K yellow gold finish or white gold color effect. If you wear one of these rings your friends will surely think you are "in the money," for it is hard to tell this ring from a genuine diamond costing many times more. Be the first in your neighborhood to own a "prosperity" simulated diamond ring. Looks like a million. SEND NO MONEY. Just send us name and address, and ring size. Pay postman $1 plus few cents postage. If you send cash with order we pay postage.

GUARANTEE! Wear ring 10 days, if not pleased return and get your money back.

HAREM CO., 30 Church St., Dept. Z-127, New York.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC

Publishers need new songs! Send poem for immediate consideration.

FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS

650 Beacon Bldg. BOSTON, MASS

BE A DETECTIVE

*Make Secret Investigations*

Earn Big money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience Unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write to GEO. T. N. WAGNER - 2640 Broadway, N. Y.

DRAFTING

MORE DRAFTSMEN NEEDED in all manufacturing and building lines—$30 to $50 a week and UP. Learn *quickly* at home in spare time. *Selective Employment Service.* Write NOW for FREE Bulletin. No obligation.

American School

Dept. DD675, Drexel & 58th, Chicago

FALSE TEETH

Save money by ordering beautiful life-like MARVEL plates, by mail. Send for illustrated folder showing many styles, including popular transparent. FREE impression material sent with instructions on taking your own mouth impression. Write Today.

AS LOW AS $7.95 PER PLATE

Send No Money! Marvel Dental Co. Dept. 26 S. 348 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill. 60 Days' Trial

*Please mention* ACE FICTION GROUP *when* *ring advertisements*


I'd just found the money so I was glad. And out the window I saw—"

"My car? Didn't you see it parked down there?"

"I saw *a* car," said Ginny, "but I didn't guess it was yours." And she resolved to put the field glasses away quickly, the moment she got home, before he could find she'd used them.

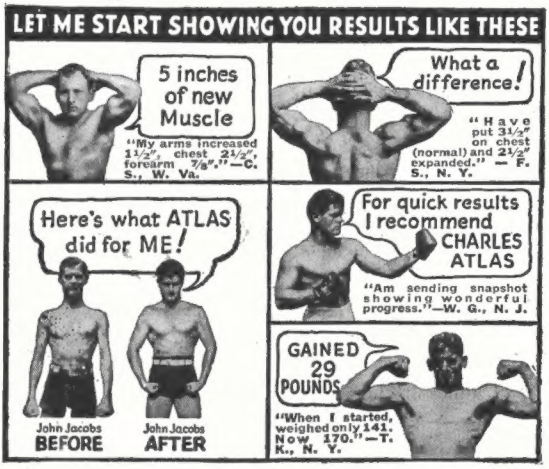
And then, because he was going to ask another question, she bent down and kissed him, and there were tears of penitence in her eyes.

She said, "Oh, Dirk, let's not talk about it any more. It's all over, and it's *our* place now, and I'll never be afraid again."

And she thought, "Oh, Dirk, I'll

have to be *such* a good wife to you to make up for those suspicions I had. And you'll never know." And she smiled, because a rather silly pun had just popped into her head: a little white lye had saved her life last night; and from now on a little white lie was going to make her marriage happier. Dirk would never, never know.

# Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*


LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"."—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded." — F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS**

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest **in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.**

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is an actual untouched snapshot.

## Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you. And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength in to your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

### What's My Secret?

**"Dynamic Tension!"** That's the ticket! The identical natural **method** that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension,"** you can laugh at **artificial** muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—**"Dynamic Tension"**—will turn the trick for you. No **theory**—every exercise is **practical.** And, man, **so easy!** Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

### FREE BOOK
**"Everlasting Health and Strength"**

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder **language.** Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book **today.** AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 49-Y, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.




**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 49-Y**
**115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

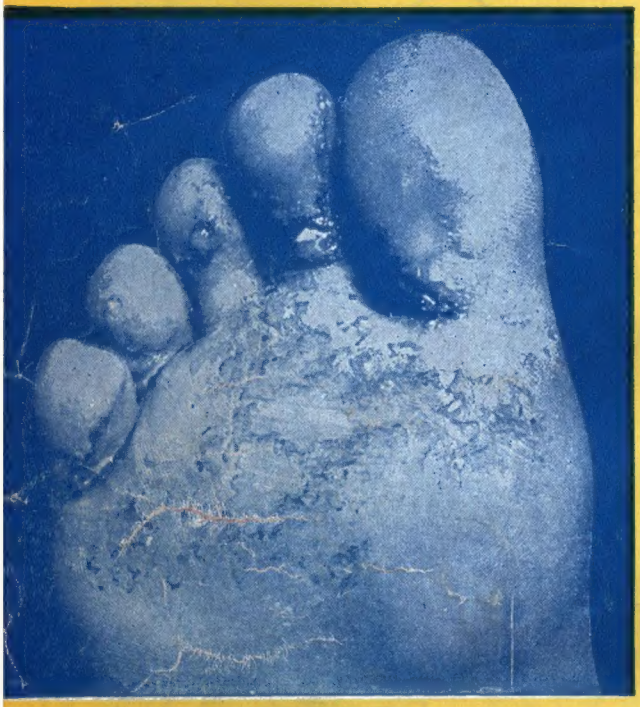
I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

# FOOT ITCH
## ATHLETE'S FOOT



## WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

## ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. night and morning until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer.

## H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

## PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED
### *SEND COUPON*

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

## BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

**GORE PRODUCTS, Inc.** ACE
**832 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.**

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....